

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
TIME TRAVELLER





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
TIME TRAVELLER**

The Three Investigators meet up with Gladys Pixie, an ageing actress who stiffly claims that thirty-two years ago, her daughter Aurora disappeared and travelled to the future in a secret time-travel experiment. Then Gladys receives a phone call from her daughter seemingly coming back from the future to tell her something. Can this be a trick to deceive the actress? Very soon, for Jupiter, Pete and Bob, the laws of logic seem to be suspended when they encounter Aurora, standing right in front of them in the flesh—without having aged a single day...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Time Traveller

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Die drei ??? und die Zeitreisende

(The Three ??? and the Time Traveller)

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1. Wasp Sting

“There is no such thing as a perfect crime!” With an exaggerated gesture, the inspector pointed to the round, worn-out wooden table in the middle of the library.

On the table, inside a transparent specimen container, was a lifeless wasp. The other four people present, had gathered around the table and were listening intently to the explanations of the heavily made-up woman with striking, almost masculine-looking features.

“Let’s recall what happened last Sunday,” the inspector said as she pulled out a small notepad from the inside of her jacket, and then adjusted her glasses. “I made a note of exactly what time we met on Mrs Brownie’s terrace—exactly 4:20 pm. I was standing directly behind the wicker chair in which the lady in question was sitting and therefore had a good view of the church clock, which could be clearly seen from that position.”

“Can you get straight to the point, Inspector?” urged Mrs Palmer, a corpulent lady of advanced years. Her wide-brimmed sun hat looked like an accessory of an old-time Hollywood diva, and gave her a touch of sophisticated glamour.

Mr Fisher, a lanky gentleman dressed in an airy white dinner jacket, held up his index finger in an instructive manner. “Patience, please. Let the Inspector continue at her own pace...” he said while giving the previous speaker a disapproving look.

“My first priority is to convict the murderer, who was really cunning in this case,” the inspector continued. “He managed to make it look as if Mrs Brownie had died as a result of a wasp sting—the venom of which she was highly allergic to.” Again she pointed to the specimen container. “... But it wasn’t. It was murder!”

“And what prompts you to make this assertion?” Dr Hopper now interfered with the explanations. “I myself performed the post-mortem examination on the deceased. There was evidence of traces of the treacherous wasp venom in her blood. I can confirm that Mrs Brownie died of an anaphylactic reaction.”

The inspector gave the doctor a disparaging look. “I don’t dispute that at all. As you said, poor Mrs Brownie did die from a wasp venom, but the venom did not come from this wasp on the table.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Mr Palmer, the brother of the deceased. “I saw the insect fly in and settle on the back of my sister’s neck... and knowing that poor Peggy’s life was in danger, I reacted immediately and swatted the insect with a rolled-up newspaper. Unfortunately, however, this wretched creature must have stung her before that.”

“At least that is what you wanted us to believe...” the inspector continued, “but the deadly venom cannot possibly have come from the insect here on the table.”

“The wasp was right here on the table after I swatted it,” Mr Palmer said. “You were here, Inspector. You saw it yourself!”

“Yes, and I had our forensic specialists inspect the remains of the insect,” the inspector continued. “They confirmed that this insect is a male wasp.”

“So?” Mr Palmer asked. “What difference does it make?”

“Only female wasps sting, males do not. This is a fact,” the inspector explained. “The stinger of a wasp is evolved from an egg-laying ovipositor, so it is only present in females. In that sense, male wasps do not have stingers, and hence cannot sting.”

“So, since this is evidence that this insect had not stung, the poison that led to Mrs Brownie’s death must have been administered to her in some other way.”

“That’s sheer nonsense!” Mr Palmer protested. “What other way could there be? We all saw the insect fly at her and I swatted it off her neck!”

“I personally didn’t see a wasp buzzing around anywhere even though I was standing in the immediate vicinity,” the inspector continued unperturbed, “and I don’t think anyone else present here noticed anything of the sort either, Mr Palmer...”

“Oh, by the way, where is the conspicuous signet ring you were wearing on the ring finger of your right hand during the tragic incident?” She looked at him lurkingly.

“What?” With a conspicuously unobtrusive movement, the person addressed buried his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “The ring? I lost it a few days ago after I had left it on my lounge before a swim in the hotel swimming pool.”

The inspector’s eyes narrowed. “What a pity! Such a beautiful ring! Then you will surely sorely miss that precious piece of jewellery. Have you already filed a report?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had a chance to do that yet with all the events that had happened,” Mr Palmer replied in a not very convincing tone. “However, you’re absolutely right—I really should do it immediately!”

Mr Palmer’s wife made an accusatory gesture. “What on earth do you intend to do by making cryptic remarks to my husband?” she hissed with a sharp tongue. “My husband’s ring is certainly none of your concern!”

The inspector smiled calmly. “It is all too understandable that you should stand by your husband so stoutly, especially since he confided in you last night and announced to you that he would report the alleged loss of the ring to the insurance company... when in fact it was not lost at all.”

“What?” Instantly all colour drained from Mrs Palmer’s face and her eyelids began to flutter nervously. “Where do you come up with this nonsense?”

“You two don’t seem to be aware of how badly soundproofed the rooms of this establishment are,” the inspector replied, “and since I’m staying right next to your room, I was able to hear every detail of your conversation yesterday.”

Mr Fisher listened with interest. “What happened?”

“The heated debate began because Mrs Palmer noticed the absence of the signet ring on her husband’s hand. Since he had apparently never taken it off for years, she demanded a plausible explanation from him for the sudden disappearance.”

“And what was his explanation?” Mr Fisher wanted to know, although he could in no way relate the inspector’s remarks to Mrs Brownie’s death.

“Well, Mr Palmer told his wife that he was going to report the ring to the insurance company as stolen in order to cover the couple’s financial problems with the sum insured.”

“A sleazy insurance scam?” commented Dr Hopper contemptuously as he walked towards the bar and poured himself a double bourbon.

“At least that’s what it was supposed to look like...” The inspector now came to the crucial point of her presentation. “In fact, Mr Palmer’s dubious story that he made the ring disappear in order to commit insurance fraud serves a completely different purpose—namely, to try to cover up the fact that this piece of jewellery is directly connected to his sister’s death!”

The accused’s wife thought she had misheard. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t give you an exact answer until the police officers have found what I had asked them to look for in your room,” the inspector replied evasively.

As if on cue, two policemen entered the library and walked purposefully towards the inspector.

“We found it!” one of the officers called out and handed the inspector a small box. Then he immediately left the library with his colleague.

“Excellent,” she praised and immediately set about examining the contents of the box. Triumphantly, she presented Mr Palmer’s missing signet ring to the astonishment of all present.

Only Dr Hopper seemed indifferent to that. “Bravo,” he commented dryly. “Then you have really succeeded in unmasking this shabby insurance fraudster... but it doesn’t clear up Mrs Brownie’s mysterious death at all.”

“Slowly, slowly...” the inspector replied meaningfully, “because now I’m going to explain to everyone present why I had the officers look for the signet ring.”

She pointed to the specimen container. “As I have already explained, the deadly poison did not come from the wasp here. Rather, when Mr Palmer went into action, he was already holding the dead insect. On his ring finger, he wore the signet ring—a ring that can be opened by a clip lock on the side.”

To demonstrate, she took the ring between her thumb and forefinger and then with her other hand, flipped open the top of the ostentatious seal. It opened like a hinged lid, and a pointed needle sprang out.

A surprised murmur escaped from those present.

“Mr Palmer inconspicuously turned the ring into position,” the inspector continued, “shouted loudly: ‘Look out!’ and stuck the needle he had prepared with wasp venom into his sister’s neck. He then placed the dead wasp from his hand on the table in front of us to make us all believe that the insect bite had been the cause of Mrs Brownie’s demise.”

“You think you’re Sherlock Holmes, don’t you?” Quick as a flash, Mr Palmer pulled a gun out of his pocket. He took turns pointing it at those present, who flinched in fright. Then he jumped unexpectedly at Mr Fisher, took the slim man in a headlock and pressed the gun to his right temple.

“One false move from anyone and this scrawny beanpole is a dead man!” he groaned menacingly as he walked backwards with his hostage towards the front door next to the counter.

“Why don’t you give up, Mr Palmer,” the inspector tried to persuade him to see reason. “You have absolutely no chance! The whole hotel area has long been surrounded by police. You’re only making things worse!”

However, the unmasked murderer seemed determined to do anything. He looked coldly at the horrified group and laughed contemptuously. “You can’t stop me! And if anyone should try to do that, I will not hesitate to use this weapon! Understand? Besides, I—”

Whack!

Dr Hopper, who had just poured himself another drink at the bar, approached Mr Palmer from behind and hit him on the hand with a half-full whisky bottle.

The force of the impact caused the weapon to slip from the criminal’s grasp, skidding across the floor towards the ornate legs of a chest of drawers.

As a spontaneous response, the inspector used her foot to stop the weapon from going under the chest of drawers. Then she picked up the gun.

At the same time, with his face contorted in pain, Mr Palmer let go of his hostage and sank to the ground, groaning.

“Good shot, doctor!” The inspector gave Dr Hopper an appreciative look. “Thanks to your glorious intervention, you have spared me and my colleagues further action. Now, this

case is solved and I can actually still meet my candlelight dinner date on time! But before that, I'll have a little victory drink!"

Smiling, she pranced to the bar counter, poured herself a luscious sherry from a decanter and emptied the contents of the glass in one go. "Delicious!" she commented afterwards. "This stuff packs a punch and tastes delicious!"

After these words, she stepped to the edge of the stage and now addressed the spellbound audience of the packed theatre directly. "I'm afraid I don't know what else you have planned for today, dear guests, so I'll be brief—if you enjoyed this performance, please recommend us to your friends, relatives and acquaintances! But if we were not able to meet your expectations with our crime play, do us the honour and keep it discreetly to yourself!"

At that moment, music sounded and the red theatre curtain closed—only to open again shortly afterwards to thunderous applause from the audience. Now the entire acting ensemble stood in a row on stage and bowed to the audience one after the other. The crowd was enthusiastic and clapped their hands, while photographers rushed to the front and unleashed a veritable flurry of flashbulbs.

The Three Investigators—Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews—were also present on this première evening. Their seats were at the edge of the sixth row.

For Pete, however, the euphoria was limited. He turned to his friends with a sceptical expression on his face. "The audience is going wild, guys... but honestly, can you understand that? The stage design was first class! But the rest..." He wrinkled his nose in displeasure.

"Give it a rest, Pete," Bob murmured to him. "I'm honestly glad that our investigation agency has solved far more challenging cases!"

"I couldn't agree more, Bob!" Jupiter remarked with a quick sideways glance. "The theatre audience in Rocky Beach obviously seems to be satisfied with quite little. Keep clapping politely anyway!"

The First Investigator turned his gaze back to the stage and noticed that the actress playing the part of the inspector, who was standing at the left end of the row, was looking directly in his direction with a panicked expression on her face. More than that, she seemed to be piercing him straight through with her eyes!

At the same moment, the curtain began to close again. Just before the left half of the curtain covered the actress, the First Investigator noticed that she suddenly turned white as a sheet and slumped lifelessly to the stage floor!

2. Première Fever

The audience continued to clap incessantly.

Jupiter, however, punched Bob excitedly in the side. “Bob, did you just see that?”

“Of course!” Bob replied. “A circulatory collapse, I’m sure! Premières are supposed to be an absolute horror for some actors!”

Pete was just about to comment on the worrying incident as well, when the curtain halves swung aside again, revealing the stage once more. The ensemble bowed again as if nothing had happened—but one crucial detail had changed.

“The inspector is no longer there!” Jupiter blurted out in surprise. “How did they get her off the stage unnoticed in those few seconds?”

The curtain was closed and opened two more times. Then the music ended, the lights went on in the auditorium, the applause died down abruptly and the audience rose from their seats and left the hall.

“They are in a hurry all of a sudden. Apart from us, no one seems to have noticed the collapse of the leading actress,” Pete remarked and looked irritatedly at the theatre guests who were streaming towards the two exits of the hall as if attracted by a magnet. “Why such a rush? It’s not that late!”

“I guess you don’t attend theatre premières too often, do you?” replied Bob wryly. “There are sandwiches and complimentary champagne waiting outside in the foyer. No one wants to miss that, of course!”

“Oh? That’s good to know!” Pete grinned. “What are we still doing here then? Let’s go grab a bite!”

“Hey, fellas. Doesn’t it make you wonder how surprisingly quickly the incident was swept under the carpet by the ensemble?” Jupiter interjected. “Think about it—a performer suddenly faints and topples over, the curtain closes, opens again and she is no longer seen on the stage.”

“—And the rest of the ensemble maintains their Hollywood smiles, and the audience continues to applaud as if nothing has happened!” added Bob.

“Maybe the rest of the troupe didn’t notice anything about the incident,” Pete said. “They were all in such a state of première fever, bathed in applause and beaming into the audience!”

Jupiter frowned. “I think that’s quite unlikely, Pete. Quite by chance, after the curtain had opened again and the inspector had suddenly disappeared, I paid attention to the other actress.”

“Which other actress?” Bob listened with interest.

“The one who played the murderer’s wife in the play—Mrs Palmer. She was hooked up to the inspector during the first bow and so at least she must have witnessed the collapse—up close and personal, in the truest sense of the word. Nevertheless, she didn’t let on either and smiled broadly and professionally into the audience! I have a feeling that something is not right and I see only one way to get clarity about this extremely strange incident.”

“We have to go backstage!” Determined, Bob rose from his seat and let his gaze wander across the stage. Apart from the three of them, no one was there anymore. “—And I recommend the easiest and most uncomplicated way—straight through the curtain!”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Bob!” praised Jupiter.

He was about to head for the small staircase leading up to the stage on the left side when a loud voice unexpectedly sounded from the exit of the hall: “Would you please leave now? We want to clean up here!”

The Three Investigators turned around in surprise. Two young men had entered the hall and were pushing a large cleaning trolley in front of them.

“That’s it, guys!” Pete murmured resignedly to his friends. “I guess that’s it for our plan... unless one of you has another strategy ready.”

Jupiter was not at all put off by the arrival of the cleaning squad. He walked purposefully over to the exit of the hall, leading his two friends with him. “There are other ways and means to put our plan into action, fellas. Follow me!”

Without asking any more questions, Pete and Bob followed their friend, who led them along a short corridor directly into the foyer. This was where the crowd of première guests had gone to feast on the sumptuous buffet set up on an elongated bar counter.

The positioning of many mirrors, columns and dark red curtains made the foyer look more like a ballroom. High up in the centre of the ceiling hung a gigantic chandelier with at least two hundred brightly glowing glass candles.

The Three Investigators looked around and Jupiter immediately spotted a stand where a grill master was using tongs to turn tantalizingly fragrant steaks that were sizzling away on a grill. Instinctively, Jupiter felt an irresistible urge to join the line of hungry patrons, but Bob seemed to have guessed his thought and vehemently pulled him back. “No way you’re going there, Juve! I know exactly what you’re craving now, but we have a mission to accomplish here first!”

Jupiter made a disappointed face while Bob inconspicuously pointed to the champagne bar. Surrounded by several local reporters, a slim man in his mid-forties stood there in an elegant dinner jacket and patiently answered all the questions of the inquisitive reporters that were raining down on him.

“That is Mr Furlough, the theatre manager,” Bob told his two friends. “He’s a real all-rounder. Not only did he write the script for this play, but he is also responsible for the direction, the set design and even the wardrobe for the actors. He designed and personally tailored all the costumes himself! At least that’s what the programme booklet said!”

“All well and good, Bob,” Pete murmured, “but I don’t think we can ask him about the actress’s breakdown now—at least not while he’s besieged by that press mob.”

At that moment, two more people entered the foyer, whose unmistakably loud laughter had already been audible from the corridor. The presence of the two ladies did not miss its effect. Immediately, those present turned around and gave their full attention to the two actresses, who were obviously enjoying the attention. As if on an invisible command, the reporters also turned away from the manager and pointed their cameras and microphones at the dazzling duo.

With a questioning expression, Bob opened his programme booklet and glanced at the cast list. “They are Heather Bedford and Maggie Shatner,” he told his friends. “Miss Bedford played Mrs Brownie, the murder victim; and Miss Shatner was Mrs Palmer, the—”

Before Bob could finish his sentence, he felt someone shoving him ungently to the side.

“My throat is like parched, Heather! Let’s go to the champagne bar!”

“Well, look here!” Pete, who had also been pushed out of the way, turned around indignantly and realized that he was facing Miss Shatner.

She looked at Pete up and down with a smug expression and then burst out laughing, exposing the entire gum of her upper jaw.

“Do we know each other?” Her arrogant tone made it clear that she was not really interested in getting an answer to her question.

Jupiter, however, did not want to miss the opportunity of this encounter and asked in a point-blank manner: “Tell me, ma’am, did the inspector actually hurt herself badly when she collapsed on stage?”

“What?” A slight twitch ran through the actress’s heavily made-up face. “Are you talking about Gladys? Gladys Pixie?”

“That’s right,” Jupiter confirmed. “We are seriously concerned and could truly enjoy this première celebration in a more relaxed way if we could gain knowledge of her current condition.”

Miss Shatner squinted impatiently at the champagne stand, where her colleague Miss Bedford had already joined the queue. “You young gentlemen can rest assured. Gladys’ circulation is already getting back on track and she’ll soon be on her feet again. That’s nothing new for her and certainly nothing to worry about. Besides, she often tends to... well, how should one put it? Too much theatrics! Yes, that’s the best way to put it! She will certainly appear here in a moment, and until then, I can only recommend that you have a glass of champagne and enjoy yourselves!”

With these words, she quickly headed for the champagne stand.

“Wow! What a strong and unique perfume!” Jupiter whispered as a passing remark.

“Lady Sophina No. 4,” Pete whispered back.

“What?” Jupe asked in surprise.

“Lady Sophina No. 4,” Pete repeated. “That’s the name of the perfume... Sassy yet sophisticated.”

“Tell me, Pete, when did you become an expert on ladies’ perfumes?” Bob asked.

“Just the other night, my mum’s friend—a filthy rich one, I might say—came to our house,” Pete explained. “She was wearing this same perfume, and they were talking about it. I was around and got a whiff of this expensive stuff.”

“All right, all right,” Bob said. “Let’s get back to what we want to do.”

Pete twisted his mouth. “So, it’s a circulatory collapse! Nothing earth-shattering, folks! And a great penchant for theatrics!” He glanced over at Miss Shatner. “This verdict on an actress colleague who must be about seventy years old doesn’t exactly sound like a declaration of love, but at least we now know that the all-clear is given. So there’s nothing more to clarify, and now our only task left is—go grab a bite!”

“Good suggestion!” Bob rejoiced and rubbed his belly hungrily. “Of course I won’t say no to a juicy steak on the house, and Jupe has been craving it for a long time anyway!” He gave his friend an amused look. To his astonishment, the First Investigator didn’t answer, but instead pinched his lower lip thoughtfully.

“Second to First!” Pete said in Jupiter’s direction. “Are you here or on another planet?”

Jupiter dropped his lip and lowered his voice. “Something is not right, fellas... and as long as I don’t have absolute certainty as to whether this Miss Shatner has told us the truth, I won’t be satisfied with her terse explanation.”

“I see...” Bob screwed up his face, “so forget about the steak and just wait here for the inspector, right?”

Jupiter nodded as he let his gaze wander once more through the crowded foyer.

In the meantime, the other members of the ensemble continued to mingle with the guests. They willingly gave interviews to the press, were available for photos, or were having a good time at one of the bars... but there was no sign of Gladys Pixie.

Then Jupiter's eyes lingered on Mr Furlough, the theatre manager, who had just retreated to a secluded corner of the foyer to make a phone call. He had ended his call as he had just let his mobile phone slip into the inside pocket of his suit.

Without hesitation, Jupiter signalled his friends to follow him and walked straight towards the manager.

"May we interrupt you for a moment, sir?" The First Investigator tried to maintain an adult tone.

"Anytime!" the manager replied, tugging his red bow tie into place. "What's it about? Do you want an interview?"

"In a way, yes," Jupiter got straight to the point. "However, our questions would not be directed at you, but at a member of your ensemble."

Mr Furlough smiled kindly and made a sweeping gesture. "Go ahead, gentlemen! My entire staff is here today and I can vouch that every single member of my ensemble will answer your questions!"

"Great, sir!" Jupiter took the manager at his word. "Then we'd like to talk to Gladys Pixie!"

"Oh! She of all people!" Unsettled, Mr Furlough buried his hands in the pockets of his suit.

Bob stumbled. "Why? Is she perhaps not well? Or do you see any other problems with her?"

"No, no, she's okay. But, well..." the theatre manager replied evasively, "... with her it's... not always easy."

Now Jupiter felt fully confirmed in his suspicion that something was amiss here. "Can you explain this in more detail, sir?"

Sullenly, Mr Furlough lowered his eyes and seemed to be struggling with himself. Finally he raised his head and with a heavy sigh gestured to a corridor adjoining the foyer. "All right, come along. Maybe you can get her to come out and mingle with us. I'll take you to her."

The manager went ahead, left the room and instructed The Three Investigators to follow him to a narrow staircase. Once there, he stopped short and let out another sigh. "Are you working for a school newspaper or just hunting for autographs?"

Jupiter thought it was more sensible to keep quiet about the actual reason for their visit. The risk that the theatre boss might change his mind at the last second seemed too great to him. "Of course, a personal talk with Miss Pixie would be a highlight, sir! And if there was an autograph to go with it—"

This answer seemed to be enough for Mr Furlough. "I'm pretty sure Gladys won't let you down. Probably enthusiastic fans are just what she needs in her condition now."

"Now it really sounds like something has happened," Bob tried to get the manager to give him more information.

"Treat Gladys like a star, boys," he said, "then everything will be all right!" He did not elaborate further.

The Three Investigators followed Mr Furlough upstairs to a door with a shiny brass sign saying 'Room 1'.

He took one deep breath and then knocked vigorously on the door. "Gladys?"

There was no response.

"Gladys!" He knocked again. "Hello? Are you in there?"

He reached for the knob, turned it, and then pushed lightly against the door.

"Locked," Jupiter remarked quietly. "I wonder if something happened in there?"

The manager waved it off calmly. "I can't imagine that!"

"What do you mean, sir?" Pete asked.

Before the theatre manager could answer Pete's question, Bob pointed to the doorknob, which slowly turned...

3. Insidious Plan

The door was only half opened. Miss Pixie looked through the gap at the four of them with a defiant expression on her face. She had not yet taken off her theatre costume. Even the shoulder-length synthetic wig, under which small beads of sweat had formed, was still perched on her head.

“What do you want, Frank?” she asked curtly.

The theatre manager ignored her offended undertone and instead pointed at The Three Investigators. “These boys here, Gladys, are big fans of yours and would like your autograph. They were waiting for you in the foyer and asked me about your whereabouts. Knowing you, I figured it might be better to bring them here before you sneak out the back again so you don’t have to attend our première party.”

“That’s exactly what I had in mind!” she snapped. “But that won’t stop me from fulfilling your autograph requests.”

“That’s really big-hearted, ma’am!” Bob responded with his most charming smile and immediately added: “Frankly, we were particularly fascinated by your performance tonight!”

For a brief moment, she smiled proudly before turning back to the theatre manager with a frown. “You shouldn’t keep the press waiting for you, Frank. You boys are welcome to come in for a moment, of course.”

She took a step to the side and granted the investigators access to her dressing room with an arm movement that reminded Pete of the exaggerated gestures of a silent movie star.

“Good luck!” Mr Furlough grumbled meaningfully and made his way back to the foyer.

When Jupiter had closed the door behind him, a tortured breath escaped Miss Pixie. “You must excuse me, but I am at my wits’ end... and if I may be honest with you, I am on the verge of leaving this company for good...”

Pete’s mouth dropped open at her confession. “What... what do you mean?”

“Do you think I locked myself in here for no reason?” Her lips began to tremble. “—Especially on such an important première night? I won’t put up with these impertinences any longer!”

The First Investigator felt a tingle rising inside him. This mission was going more successfully than he had hoped. The actress was in such an agitated state of mind that she volunteered to tell The Three Investigators what was bothering her. It almost seemed as if she would explode with a loud bang at any moment if she had to keep her anger to herself for even a few seconds longer.

Before any of The Three Investigators could have said anything, the volcano in Miss Pixie actually erupted. “If even one member of this ensemble thinks I lack the discriminating power to recognize what is being played with me in this theatre, he or she has cut himself or herself a good deal!”

With a swift movement, the actress pulled the wig from her head and with a skilful toss, propelled it onto the shelf of her dressing table. “You witnessed it yourself tonight. In the final scene, Dr Hopper knocks the gun out of the criminal’s hand with the whisky bottle. According to the script, the gun then falls to the floor, and I am to rush over and grab it.”

“Wasn’t that what happened?” Pete asked.

“No,” the actress replied. “I am dependent on the reliable interplay with my acting colleagues. It was only thanks to my professionalism tonight that Roy Sanders’s rotten plan didn’t work out!”

“Roy Sanders?” Bob wondered. “That’s the actor who plays the part of the murderer in the play, right?”

“Actor?” Miss Pixie uttered a snide sound. “He’s an amateur of the first degree! Today he wanted to embarrass me in front of the audience and all the press too... but not with Gladys Pixie! After all, I learned my trade from scratch!”

“What on earth has he done?” Bob finally wanted to know.

Before Miss Pixie answered, she went to her dressing table, took a tissue from a cardboard box and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead with it. “When the gun is knocked out of his hand by Leonard Harris—I mean Dr Hopper—Roy has to make sure it falls in my direction. In fact he hurled the gun to the floor with such momentum that it was about to slide under the chest of drawers.” She gasped excitedly. “If I wasn’t quick enough to stop it with my foot, it would have gone under the drawers and I would have to scramble down to retrieve it. What an embarrassment that would have been if I didn’t manage to get the gun out?”

“Admirably, you succeeded in preventing that from happening!” Bob said, although he did not think that it was such a serious matter.

Miss Pixie returned this remark with a proud smile. “It’s thanks to my exceedingly quick reactions that I managed to stop the gun in time, otherwise—”

“Why?” Pete grabbed his head. “You think that this Roy Sanders threw the gun under the drawers on purpose to mess up your performance?”

The actress plucked the gold clips from her earlobes and placed them in a box. “I have been a thorn in the side of the entire ensemble for a long time. The only reason is that I outshine them all with my acting talent so much so that they look like extras next to me! It’s just in my blood! You can’t blame me for that!”

The Three Investigators exchanged meaningful glances.

Miss Pixie did not seem to lack self-confidence, at least on the surface. Underneath, however, she radiated deep despair.

“—And good Frank Furlough is in on it too!” she continued her explanations. “As the manager of this theatre, it should really be his job to keep the troupe together, but I have long felt that he is turning my colleagues against me! How often has money been lost from my purse in this dressing room? And pages keep disappearing from my script!”

“That is of course more than strange, ma’am,” Jupiter tried to bring the eccentric actress’s flow of speech back to a factual level. “—But why should the theatre manager, of all people, have an interest in scaring you away from his theatre, when he even gave you the leading role in this play?”

Miss Pixie’s eyes narrowed to slits. “That’s what’s so disgusting. That guy is so clever that despite all the intrigues, he even manages to look like an innocent angel in the end when the other members of the ensemble have ruined me—on his behalf, of course!”

The First Investigator crossed his arms demonstratively. “That doesn’t answer my question, ma’am. Mr Furlough could simply have given you a much smaller role. So again, doesn’t the fact that he gave you the lead role contradict your accusations?”

“If you had listened to me carefully just now, you would know that I was very much responding to your question!” she snapped at him. “Although I know of course that my acting talent is absolutely unique and causes a lot of envy, I am also aware that I am not always the easiest person to deal with. I just say straight out what I think, and many people find that

uncomfortable—especially in this ensemble, where superficialities and untruthful compliments are the order of the day. In the end, everyone fights for themselves here and tries to get the best roles. For many, this cannot be mastered with fair play. Such people only resort to underhanded methods to achieve their goals! It is precisely this circumstance that Mr Furlough exploits for his own purposes.”

“So you suspect that Mr Furlough has in some way incited Mr Sanders to throw the gun under the chest of drawers?” Bob asked.

“You got it!” Miss Pixie stroked her tongue over her dry lips. “Strange as it may sound, I’ll bet my next leading role that Furlough is lining up Sanders for the Inspector role! And before any of you get the idea of asking me again about the motives, I’ll briefly explain what’s actually going on here...”

“Professionally, our theatre manager is beyond any doubt. He wants to make great theatre, which is why he wisely cast me in the leading role. However at the same time, he is a conflict-averse person. That’s why he attaches the utmost importance to absolute harmony in his ensemble. To achieve this, he is not exactly squeamish in his choice of means. So when an exceptional talent like me doesn’t fit into this ‘we-all-love-each-other’ concept, he exploits the displeasure of my colleagues and spurs them on to go against me. That is supposed to make me take my hat off of my own accord and pursue my career elsewhere.”

“So...” Jupiter hesitated for a moment, then decided to ask Miss Pixie the provocative question after all. “So what moves you to defy these intrigues?”

The hitherto quick-witted diva suddenly seemed to be at a loss for words. Resignedly, she sank down on the chair in front of her dressing table. Then she looked in the mirror for eye contact with The Three Investigators. “Well, I’m attached to this theatre... and I could have easily taken care of the issue with the gun. You can believe me, but—”

“Yes?” Suddenly, the First Investigator felt a strong uneasiness rising within him. Now, at last, the actress seemed to be getting to the point that had prompted him and his two friends to meet her in the first place.

“What I’m about to tell you is actually unbelievable, but I’m absolutely certain that a member of the ensemble gave me some kind of hallucinogenic drug during the performance tonight.”

“Huh?” Bob thought he had misheard. “How is this supposed to have happened?”

“Quite simple—with the help of the carafe from which I pour myself a sherry at the end. The liquid I’m drinking in this scene is actually apple juice and no one else is drinking it but me.”

Jupiter’s brain began to rotate feverishly. “From what do you conclude that a drug was added to the juice? Could it be that after the performance ended, you saw something that suddenly terrified you? So much so that you fainted?”

“How do you know?” As if struck by lightning, Miss Pixie’s eyes widened in horror. Then she stepped towards the First Investigator, stopped close in front of him and repeated her question. “How do you know that? Come on, out with it!”

Startled by Miss Pixie’s violent reaction, Jupiter took a step back. However, he immediately regained his composure and calmly began to explain. “I was sitting in the audience with my two friends, ma’am, and had a close eye on what was happening on stage. Therefore, it did not escape my notice that during your final bow on stage you apparently saw something that must have scared you to death. Until now, I had assumed that it was about me personally, because you were looking in my direction. In the meantime, however, I am firmly convinced that it was something else that gave you such a shock that you collapsed.”

Miss Pixie was stunned. “It... it was nothing...” she stammered. “As I said... just a hallucination.”

“—And what hallucination would that be?” Jupiter tried to find out in a calm voice.

The actress turned around and slowly approached her dressing table again. There, as if in a trance, she detached a photograph from the mirror and handed it to the First Investigator.

“This photograph was taken thirty-two years ago,” she whispered in a trembling voice. “The girl sitting on the swing is my daughter. Shortly after this photo was taken, she disappeared without a trace and has never reappeared since. I cannot and must not say a word about the circumstances of her disappearance... and if I did, I would be immediately sent to have my state of mind examined... That seems to be exactly what a member of this ensemble is after...”

4. Straight into the Future!

“Just a moment, ma’am,” Jupiter tried to coax more information out of Miss Pixie. “Are you telling us that you saw your daughter in the—”

The First Investigator’s question was abruptly interrupted by a loud knock on the dressing room door. Then someone shouted “*The Rocky Beach Weekender!*” outside the door.

The actress did not hesitate another second and called out in a whistling voice: “Come in!”

The door was opened. Two men, armed with a camera, microphone and recorder, entered the dressing room and stood before the visibly flattered lady.

“We’re from *The Rocky Beach Weekender*,” repeated one of them with a snow-white row of teeth, while the other bowed humbly to Miss Pixie.

“You were simply great again and the highlight of tonight!” said the first man. “We would like to do a short interview with you, if you don’t mind, of course!”

With professional speed, Miss Pixie pulled her hair into place and batted her glued-on eyelashes. At the same time, one of the reporters looked at The Three Investigators in annoyance and the actress instantly noticed it.

“The three boys were just about to leave anyway!” she said and pointed with an outstretched index finger towards the exit. “Weren’t you, gentlemen?”

However, Jupiter did not want to admit defeat so abruptly. “Would it perhaps be possible for us to have a conversation—”

“Really, quite lovely of you,” Miss Pixie interrupted him in a sweet tone, “but I’ve had a busy evening and the press comes first! I’d love to talk to you another time, but that’s it for today!”

“Could we possibly—” Jupe began.

“Come on, Jupe.” The Second Investigator was annoyed and pulled Jupiter with him to the door. Bob followed his two friends and they left the dressing room without saying anything else.

When Bob had closed the door behind him, Pete looked at his friends in amazement. “I haven’t seen anything so brazen in a long time,” he said, venting his anger. “Who does she think she is? If I wasn’t so well brought up, I would have liked to tell her in the presence of the reporters what politeness and good manners mean!”

Bob put his hand on Pete’s shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t get upset, Pete! Such behaviour is perfectly normal for celebrities.”

The office of The Three Investigators—their headquarters—was located in an old mobile home trailer that was hidden under a huge pile of junk in The Jones Salvage Yard operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda. This trailer housed everything that was useful for the successful trio’s investigations. That included computer equipment, communication gadgets, a crime laboratory, and a complete file archive of all their cases solved so far.

When Pete and Jupiter arrived at Headquarters the next afternoon, Bob was already sitting in front of the computer. He looked extremely busy and only waved his hand in greeting.

“When our friend pays so little attention to us, there is usually some interesting research behind it,” Jupiter remarked as he took off his shoes and slumped into one of the armchairs with a groan.

Meanwhile, Pete joined Bob at the desk and glanced at the screen. “You’ve got to be kidding!” he said in surprise after reading the name in the search engine’s input box. “You’re actually doing research on that scarecrow? What do you expect to get out of it?”

Jupiter’s ears perked up immediately. “Is it about Gladys Pixie?”

“You got it, Jupe,” the Second Investigator confirmed with an annoyed undertone. “Yesterday, I knew that you were scrambling for another case as always. However, after the disturbed ramblings of that *grande dame* of Rocky Beach Theatre and her unceremonious dismissal of us, I feel more of an urge to grab my swimming gear and head down to the beach.”

“What’s got into you, Pete?” replied Jupiter. “Yesterday’s theatre evening with our subsequent visit to the dressing room was extremely revealing and calls for an explanation of the strange occurrences!”

“Revealing?” Pete laughed briefly. “Then let me summarize, shall I? Gladys Pixie tried to convince us yesterday in an endless monologue that she has a gifted and unique acting talent. That alone is a joke, because if I may permit myself a layman’s judgement, I was not really blown away by her acting. That goes for the rest of the ensemble as well.”

Jupiter grinned broadly. “Mr Furlough can count himself lucky that you are not a theatre critic, Pete. It’s unthinkable if a review written by you were to appear in the press.”

“For a small theatre, all this may be within acceptable limits,” Pete continued undeterred, “but this Miss Pixie is acting as if she is one of Hollywood’s best-paid stars, whose theatre colleagues are jealous of her success and therefore want her out of the way. Then you two immediately smell a case for The Three Investigators. That’s ridiculous! Besides, Miss Pixie hasn’t given us any case to investigate.”

“—Only because we didn’t have the opportunity to offer her our services as investigators,” Jupiter countered vehemently. “If those two reporters hadn’t suddenly appeared in her dressing room—”

“I’m glad you brought it up, Jupe,” Pete interrupted him. “I almost lost my temper! In the beginning, we were good enough for Miss Pixie to listen to her long woeful story. I thought it was more than strange that she immediately confided in us, even though she didn’t know us at all. However, when the press rushed in, in a matter of seconds, we were of no use to the diva and were shooed out into the corridor like annoying flies!” He grimaced sourly. “Sorry, guys, but for such a self-centred person, I am not prepared to waste my valuable free time, let alone offer her our services like a suppliant!”

Unimpressed and without responding to Pete’s rant, Jupiter turned to Bob and asked: “So Bob, what’s your verdict?”

Bob looked up from the screen in annoyance. “About Miss Pixie or about your intention to investigate the case?”

“—About both,” Jupiter replied.

“Frankly, I think Pete has a point, Jupe,” Bob said. “As a rule, my jaws drop when I’m so rudely dumped by someone, but I also know from my job at Sax Sendler’s music agency that performing artists are a very special breed. They love to show off in all their glory, claiming to be brilliant and unique. Because of their thirst for recognition, they often have little hesitation in revealing their private lives even to the public. This phenomenon is also widespread among politicians. Illusions rule this world, and that’s why I can understand why Miss Gladys Pixie likes to make herself a bit important.”

“A little is an understatement, Bob!” Pete continued. “By the way, I also think it’s pretty rotten when someone accuses her theatre colleagues of unfair behaviour, but in return acts just as unfairly against them and then denounces these people by name to third parties! Yet this is obviously only a suspicion without a single shred of evidence.” He tapped his finger contemptuously against his forehead. “Think about it, fellas—for what reason should a second-rate actress be given a hallucinogenic drug during a public performance in a small theatre? And if, just suppose, the plan was indeed to make Miss Pixie hallucinate, why wait until after the end of the performance?”

“I also think that her hallucination theory is absurd,” Jupiter agreed with the Second Investigator. “Nevertheless, we should not rule her out completely, at least not until we find out the real reason for her collapse.”

“Jupe! You’re not serious, are you?” Pete thought he had misheard. “May I remind you how that Miss Shatner and even the manager commented on Gladys Pixie? If you ask me, this woman just needs an extreme amount of attention and recognition. So I wonder, Jupe, why you of all people would want to seriously concern yourself with such a trifle?”

“Can you two stop arguing?” Bob interrupted the exchange and looked up from the screen. “I came across something very bizarre here, and I don’t want to deprive you of it.”

“Bizarre?” Pete laughed contemptuously. “That word describes exactly the impression that grandma left on me! So go ahead and shoot!”

Bob looked at the screen again. “What can be found on the Internet about the professional career of our actress can be described as extremely meagre. There are various details about her date of birth, but if you go for the average, you come up with an approximate age of sixty-five. When she was a teenager, she had her first role as a supporting actress in a children’s theatre in Seattle, in which she portrayed a deaf-mute maid. Performances on various cabarets followed until Miss Pixie met a certain Quentin Kurtz. In the same year, they had a child—a girl—and she was named Aurora Pixie-Kurtz.”

All at once Jupiter remembered Miss Pixie’s last words just before the abrupt interruption by the reporters and he felt a vague sense of trepidation rising inside him. “The photograph on Miss Pixie’s dressing room mirror! It was her daughter who disappeared then!” His heartbeat quickened. “Is there any more information?”

“You can safely shift down a gear, Jupe,” Bob tried to curb his friend’s sudden excitement. “If I tell you what Miss Pixie said happened in New York thirty-two years ago, you too, Jupe, will turn away from the whole affair, shaking your head, and certainly bury your intention of investigating the matter further.”

Pete was already wallowing in anticipation. “I’m all ears! Out with it!”

“All right, I’ll be brief,” Bob went on to the grand finale. “After the admittedly more than peculiar disappearance of her then twelve-year-old daughter Aurora, Miss Pixie made known that her missing child had been abducted...” He took a deep breath. “... Abducted by a time traveller, straight into the future!”

5. Disappeared Without a Trace

It took Jupiter a few seconds to react to Bob's last piece of information. He approached the screen and took an interested look at the website. "Since I firmly believe that you are not joking with us, it is to be expected that Miss Pixie's statement is based on some background information that you will surely let us know, right?"

Bob nodded and called up another page with a few mouse clicks. "I have here an article from a well-known gossip magazine which was discontinued some fifteen years ago. The author gave more details of this case. Gladys Pixie's then partner and father of the twelve-year-old daughter Aurora was the nuclear physicist Quentin Kurtz. He was, at the time, employed at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, where he worked at an electron synchrotron."

"An electron what?" Pete asked irritably.

"An electron synchrotron," Jupiter took over the explanation. "A synchrotron is a particle accelerator in which charged sub-atomic particles—in this case, electrons—are accelerated to extremely high velocities by means of electric or electromagnetic fields. The Brookhaven facility is an institute for scientific research, primarily concerned with the development, construction and operation of particle accelerators."

Pete frowned. "I seem to be the stupid one of the three of us. What is a particle accelerator?"

"Nuclear physics isn't for everyone," the First Investigator replied, while secretly winking at Bob. "Particle accelerators produce beams of charged particles which can be used for a variety of research purposes."

"I see," Pete replied dryly, "and what is the point of this research? I mean, what does science get out of these findings?"

The First Investigator continued with one of his notorious lectures: "This is where the world-famous physicist Albert Einstein comes into play with his 1905 Theory of Special Relativity which talks about the relationship between space and time. He came up with an idea about how time works, and introduced his concept of 'relativity'. I won't bore you with all the details of his theory, only the aspects that are related to our case—"

"Thank you for being so considerate, sir," Pete interrupted, "but please continue with the lecture..."

"So pay attention..." Jupiter continued after giving the Second Investigator a nasty look. "One aspect of his theory talks about 'time dilation'. Einstein was the first to realize that time is not constant, as previously believed, but instead slows down as you move faster through space. This means that the faster you travel, the slower you experience time. For example, a person travelling close to the speed of light will experience time, and all the after effects such as ageing, much more slowly than a person at rest. However, his theory was strongly doubted by many scientists of the time, as there was no suitable equipment to verify the theory.

"It was only through the development and construction of particle accelerators that Einstein's theory could be scientifically tested. These machines could generate beams of sub-atomic particles travelling at nearly the speed of light. Certain properties of the particles were used as a clock, from which time could be measured and compared between moving and

stationary particles. As it is, experiments have since verified the theory with unprecedented accuracy.

“So what was dismissed as pure science fiction at the time is now one of the accepted results of scientific research. In the opinion of many renowned physicists, based on this knowledge, the idea of time travel, which was considered insane, no longer seems to be a fantasy.”

“Excuse me?” Pete shook his head in disbelief. “They are seriously dealing with time travel in this research institute?”

“I think Jupe would like that,” Bob smirked, “mainly so that Miss Pixie’s time travel theory concerning her missing daughter would be given more weight and we would take up her ominous case.”

“Now hold on a moment,” Jupiter continued pointedly. “Before we get too carried away with this time travel thing, I would like to point out that it’s not quite what you’ve probably seen in the movies. Under real-world conditions, it is possible to experience a time difference of the order of fractions of a second. If you are thinking of time travel where you could hop into a machine and go several years into the past or future, that I have to disappoint you. I can’t see that happening in the near future—no pun intended.”

“Thank you for the detailed explanations...” Pete rose spiritedly from his chair. “As far as a particle accelerator is concerned, my need for knowledge is now covered for the time being. Is there anything else to report that might convince our First Investigator that Miss Pixie has simply lost her marbles?”

Bob turned his gaze back to the screen. “Where was I?”

“You were saying that Quentin Kurtz was employed at the electron synchrotron in Long Island at the time,” Jupiter reminded him.

“That’s right,” Bob confirmed. “In any case, the circumstances leading to the disappearance of Aurora, who was twelve years old at the time, is more than mysterious. According to Miss Pixie, she and her daughter were together at that time, in the kitchen of an apartment in New York that she had moved into with Quentin Kurtz and Aurora only six months earlier.” With his finger, he pointed to the screen. “Here is the same photo of the daughter that was placed at Miss Pixie’s dressing room mirror.”

“There you go!” The First Investigator’s eyes began to glow excitedly. “If this doesn’t sound like a case for The Three Investigators, you may call me ‘Baby Fatso’ as and when you wish!”

Pete and Bob laughed in amusement. It had been ages since Jupiter had appeared in the television series *The Wee Rogues* as ‘Baby Fatso’—a precocious three-year-old with the vocabulary of a college student. Somehow, without any effort, he had always managed to make the audience roar with laughter. Today Jupiter knew why. One look at the chubby, know-it-all little fellow spoke volumes. Everyone was laughing their heads off at him. The First Investigator was extremely reluctant to be reminded of this as he considered it a dark spot in his life. Pete and Bob were all the more surprised that the First Investigator now unexpectedly mentioned this name.

“You seem to be really keen on this case,” Bob remarked. “However, with all due restraint, I would like to point out to you that neither Miss Pixie nor any other member of the theatre company has commissioned us to investigate this matter.”

The First Investigator waved away Bob’s objection with a wave of his hand. “What prompted Miss Pixie to tell the press that her daughter had been taken to another time? I thought you mentioned that the writer of this article gave more details. So, what is it?”

“Okay, if you insist...” Bob capitulated, knowing that Jupiter could be very persistent and any objections would come to nothing. “The story is so wacky that you could almost find it amusing if the whole thing wasn’t so bitter.”

He paused before continuing: “As I said, Quentin Kurtz was employed at this electron synchrotron and enjoyed an excellent reputation there as a nuclear physicist. However, as time went by, tensions between him and Miss Pixie grew worse, and she claimed that it was due to Quentin Kurtz being obsessed with the insane idea of making human time travel a reality. According to her, he got so into this project that he was hardly able to think about anything else and completely ignored his other responsibilities. It was unbearable for Gladys Pixie, and on top of that, Kurtz was eventually dismissed from his job one day.”

Jupiter listened with interest. “Did Gladys Pixie explain why?”

“I’m sure she did, Jupe!” Pete sneered. “When a diva like that speaks to a reporter from a gossip magazine, she has no shame!”

“Internal theft,” Bob continued unperturbed. “Kurtz is said to have gradually ordered a considerable number of technical equipment and components on behalf of the research institute, but had secretly kept them for himself. The suspicion was that he had set up his own research facility outside the institute. Before anyone could prove this and hold him responsible, Kurtz was suddenly gone as if he had disappeared from the face of the earth. For years, the authorities tried to locate him but were unsuccessful. Even his alleged private research facility could not be found.

“Shortly afterwards, his daughter also disappeared. According to Miss Pixie, she was baking biscuits with Aurora in the kitchen when the girl mentioned, completely out of context, that she was going to travel with her father to the future. Gladys Pixie had just put a baking tray in the oven, and when she turned around, her daughter had disappeared without a trace.

“Apparently, to this day, the girl has not reappeared, and neither has Quentin Kurtz... End of story.”

6. A New Case

“What do you mean ‘end of story’?” Pete put on a puzzling look. He looked around distraught. “So a child disappears... and the child’s father too... and the police just take note of such a crazy time travel story by an even crazier actress and then close the case?”

Bob shook his head decisively. “No, not that... Gladys Pixie was literally taken apart in court. She had to endure a real ordeal for years, because no one bought her abstruse story. Psychological and criminological investigations into whether she had been involved in her daughter’s disappearance ultimately led to no results.

“After ten years, the investigations were finally discontinued. Since then, Gladys Pixie has been considered a person of good repute, at least before the law. Despite, or rather because of the media hype at the time, she still had a dubious reputation after this story. That is why she can probably even be glad to have regained her footing and at least be allowed to play in our small city theatre today...”

Pete listened in astonishment. “What are you trying to say, Bob?”

Bob rose from the chair, tired from sitting for so long. “The old lady, as weird as she may be and as much as she indulges in her crazy theories here and there, has been through a lot. I don’t think any of us can really relate to what it means for a mother to lose her own daughter. Whatever actually happened back then, we should not open up old wounds... and that is why I am pleading to let this incident rest and—”

“Juupeeterrr!”

The voice that penetrated from the salvage yard to the trailer was all too familiar to The Three Investigators.

Pete rolled his eyes in annoyance. “You aunt probably want us to unload another trailer full of junk. I don’t feel like doing that right now. The best thing is to keep quiet and pretend we’re not here!”

“Where are you?” Mrs Jones persisted. “I have sensational news for you!”

Bob raised his eyebrows suspiciously. “I wonder if this is a trap to lure us outside? Perhaps it’s the latest trick of a clever businesswoman.”

“Then she can only try it on us once,” Jupiter concluded, “so we’ll take our chances now, fellas!”

Without waiting for a reaction, Jupiter stepped out of the trailer into a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal. This led to the back wall of a huge discarded refrigerator which they called the ‘Cold Gate’, and it was a secret exit out to the salvage yard.

Jupiter triggered a mechanism that enabled the back wall of the fridge to be pushed aside. Then he reached in to open the front door of the fridge a gap, peeked out to make sure that nobody was watching, before he crept out, followed by Bob. The Cold Gate was well camouflaged, as it was only seen by outsiders as what was just an old fridge in the middle of a mountain of scrap and junk.

Pete, who was the last to come out of the Cold Gate, quickly closed the fridge door behind him and went with his friends to meet Jupiter’s aunt.

She had positioned herself in the middle of the salvage yard, waving a newspaper excitedly and beaming all over. “There you are, boys! I’m so proud of you!”

The Three Investigators had not the faintest idea what had made Mrs Jones so ecstatic. She was so excited that her voice almost rolled over. “At last the neighbourhood sees that you have something for serious culture besides your investigation games!”

“Serious culture? What do you mean, Aunt Mathilda?” Jupiter asked.

Mrs Jones winked amusedly at her nephew. “You don’t have to deny your interest in art, Jupe... because now I have it in black and white!” In high spirits, she held the open weekly newspaper under the noses of The Three Investigators and pointed to a large-format photo that took up almost a third of the entire page.

The first thing that caught Bob’s eye was the lurid headline. “‘Frenetic Applause for a Successful Première!’” he read in surprise. “Yesterday’s première of the crime play *The Fatal Sting* at the Rocky Beach City Theatre—”

“The photo!” Mrs Jones interrupted him excitedly, tapping the picture. “Look at the photo!”

It was a pin-sharp panoramic frontal view of the packed theatre. On the left edge of the sixth row sat Jupiter, Pete and Bob with their hands clapping, although their faces showed little enthusiasm.

“Isn’t that great?” Mrs Jones was barely restrained.

Pete made a face. “You two look quite passable in the photo, but I have this stupid look on my face... If Jeffrey sees it, he’ll tease me about it for months to come!”

Jupiter meanwhile squinted his eyes and inspected the photograph carefully. With his mouth open, he could not take his eyes off it and began to pinch his lower lip thoughtfully. “This is unbelievable...”

“You said it, Jupe!” Pete agreed with him. “It’s lucky I don’t have any modelling ambitions. With a photo like that, I’d be rejected by any agency forever and ever!”

Mrs Jones showed little understanding for Pete’s comment. “Well, I’d like to have your problems! The fact that you are now part of the cultural elite doesn’t seem to excite you in the least! What a pity. Nevertheless, you can keep this article for your archives. Now I must return to the kitchen. I have a cherry pie in the oven!”

Shaking her head, she turned and returned to the Jones family home, which was a two-storey house situated just outside the salvage yard, with a small gate separating them.

“This photo...” Pete still couldn’t believe it. “Kelly will also dump scorn and ridicule on me, I can expect that!”

Bob meanwhile gave Jupiter a questioning look. “What’s wrong, Jupe? You’re making a face as if you’ve just seen a ghost!”

Jupiter waited until his aunt had gone into the house, only then did he come out with an answer: “That’s exactly how it is, Bob, in the truest sense of the word... and now it’s irrefutable—The Three Investigators have a new case!”

7. An Oppressive Feeling

“We need to go back to the computer, Bob, and revisit the article in that gossip magazine that was discontinued fifteen years ago!”

“No problem, Jupe,” Bob replied and followed the First Investigator into Headquarters with Pete. Once there, he swung himself onto the ramshackle swivel chair and scrolled back with the mouse to the beginning of the magazine article in question.

“Which part are you looking for exactly?” Bob wanted to know, while Jupiter positioned himself behind him and nervously tapped his foot.

“I must see that photograph again! The photo that was placed at Miss Pixie’s dressing room mirror! And if you—” He paused momentarily. “There it is!” he burst out as he stared at the screen. His hunch had been confirmed.

“Jupe!” Pete could no longer hold back. “Could you share your thoughts with us? Why is the photo of Miss Pixie’s daughter suddenly so important to you?”

The First Investigator beckoned Pete to him and made a serious face. “So far, I could understand why you didn’t like this self-centred actress and her abstruse time travel story. Her twelve-year-old daughter Aurora suddenly disappeared into thin air thirty-two years ago and, according to Miss Pixie’s account, she vanished into the future with the help of Quentin Kurtz’s miracle machine.”

Pete rolled his eyes in annoyance. “I thought we’d been through all this, Jupe! Why, in the devil’s name, are you bringing it up again?”

“Just wait, Pete!” Jupiter raised his hand defensively. “Before I give you an answer to that, allow me a simple arithmetic question... Assuming that Miss Pixie’s daughter Aurora, who disappeared thirty-two years ago at the age of twelve, were to reappear unexpectedly today, how old should she be by now?”

The Second Investigator did not have to think long for this arithmetical task. “About forty-four years old.”

“Absolutely correct,” Jupiter confirmed, while Bob, like Pete, still had no clue why primary school arithmetic was required here.

Then the First Investigator showed mercy and let the cat out of the bag. “I’ve been wondering all along what got Miss Pixie so excited during the final bow that she suddenly collapsed after a quick glance into the auditorium. Now, thanks to this weekly newspaper’s photographer, I finally have an answer.”

“*The Weekender?*” Bob began to roll back and forth on his swivel chair.

Jupiter reached for the weekly newspaper, opened it, placed it on the keyboard of the computer and then pointed alternately to the photo on the Internet and the one in the newspaper.

In disbelief, Bob and Pete’s eyes wandered from one photo to the other.

“But... that’s impossible,” Pete stammered. “The girl sitting right behind us in the seventh row... she looks just like the one in Miss Pixie’s photo!”

“Not only that...” Bob added after a closer look. “The two of them are even wearing the exact same dress and are like each other in every detail...”

The Second Investigator did not want to believe what he saw before him and frantically searched for an explanation that could allay his worst fears. "It could just be a stupid coincidence!" he tried to convince himself and his friends. "A similar-looking child sitting—for whatever reason—in the wrong place at the wrong time... and we let ourselves be carried away unnecessarily into considering some crazy theories!"

"I, for one, don't remember saying anything along these lines," Jupiter clarified unequivocally. "I am pleasantly surprised that you also consider it impossible that this girl in the seventh row could be Aurora Pixie-Kurtz, who has suddenly been teleported from the past or future back to the present, directly to the Rocky Beach City Theatre."

"At least Miss Pixie will hold to that theory, Juve," Bob pointed out. "Now that this photo has been published in our weekly newspaper, she has all the more reason to believe it! Worse still, she'll take it as irrefutable proof that her claim at the time was true."

"Well..." Jupiter muttered, staring at the two photos in turn again and again. "Since for once, we seem to agree that this girl in the theatre cannot be Miss Pixie's time-travelling daughter Aurora. So the question is, who is this person then? Unlike Pete, I seriously doubt that we are dealing with a coincidentally and identically dressed double who has also coincidentally strayed into a theatre where Miss Pixie is performing on stage that night of all nights."

"Then I plead to investigate this case, fellas," Pete said.

"Excuse me?" exclaimed both Jupiter and Bob in surprise.

The Second Investigator's face suddenly radiated full determination. He enjoyed the attention his friends were now giving him.

"May I ask what caused this sudden change of heart in you?" Jupiter enquired, visibly irritated. "All this time you've been raging against this actress and trying to dissuade me from taking on the matter with your typical arguments. So now you've changed your mind?"

"That's right," Pete walked towards the armchair and dropped into it with relish. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out for yourselves, but it's now perfectly obvious to me that the esteemed Miss Pixie is behind all this!"

"Huh?" Jupiter echoed in astonishment. "—And what motives should have prompted her to stage this story?"

"Bob said it earlier," Pete explained. "Miss Pixie was denied the fame she had hoped for. The big, wide theatre world is not interested in her one bit. In view of her age, there will probably not be many more opportunities to change that. So what could be more obvious than an attempt to rehash the events of thirty-two years ago in order to gain public attention? One last pitiful attempt to make the leap from a small stage to Broadway through media exposure." He grinned contemptuously. "She can probably see the headlines ahead of her: 'Gifted actress in shock! Time-travelling daughter from the future resurfaces! Hollywood secures movie rights!' She'd probably like that! ... But The Three Investigators will put a spoke in her wheel!"

Bob listened in wonder. "And how?"

"By going to the City Theatre this very evening, intercepting Miss Pixie after the performance and formally proposing to her that we take up the case of her daughter who has returned from the future," Pete said.

"An interesting suggestion, Pete," Jupiter replied. "Assuming you're right in your theory, what could Miss Pixie's interest be in hiring investigators when she's trying to hide something from us?"

"That's the point!" Pete's fingers began to drum on the armrest of the armchair. "She certainly won't take us up on our offer, Juve, because then, as you so aptly pointed out, she

would be extremely stupid! But how will she react if, after her rejection, we tell her that we will investigate this matter on our own? Well? I can already give you the answer! I bet she'll start to flounder and give us all kinds of reasons why we should stay out of the matter." Pete was really getting into his stride now. "You'll see how unpleasant she can get for fear that we will find out about her and ruin her cunning plan! And then when we—"

"Tell me," Jupiter interrupted him, "is there any particular reason why you're using such heavy artillery against Miss Pixie? It's very rare to see you so quick-tempered."

Pete rose from his chair with a flourish and blew a strand of hair out of his face. "This woman has used us as a rubbish bin for her psychoses and lies, and has shipped us out the door like annoying flies." He gasped indignantly. "This disrespectful behaviour must be stopped, and that's why it will be my pleasure to expose Miss Pixie's construct of lies and expose her Hollywood plans! That's what she gets for being so arrogant!"

The First Investigator was about to point out some logical flaws in Pete's suspicions, but then he reconsidered and kept his doubts to himself for the time being. "Fine, fellas," he replied instead with a glance at his watch. "The performance at the City Theatre ends around 10 pm. We'll get there a quarter of an hour beforehand tonight, intercept Miss Pixie at her dressing room door and then confront her with the aforementioned photograph. Everything else will remain to be seen. Pete has already given the go-ahead for this. How about you, Bob?"

"Are you serious?" he asked with feigned astonishment, but then continued in a matter-of-fact tone: "Under the new circumstances, I have also changed my view on this story. The matter really stinks to high heaven... and that's why I too give my okay!"

"Perfect!" Jupiter was now fully in his element again. "That means it's our turn now!"

8. The Girl in the Photo

The Rocky Beach City Theatre was located in the middle of the city, only three streets away from the centre. In the years of its existence, it had experienced all kinds of ups and downs, but it was still an unusual and impressive building that had only recently been renovated.

From the outside, it looked like a Greek temple where tall white columns supported a triangular roof, behind which rose a huge concrete dome. Flat steps led to a double-winged entrance door made of glass and multiple curved, ornate iron. To the right and left, the magnificent old building was enclosed by faceless office façades, and with its wide driveway, it looked as if it wanted to slip backwards out of the concrete enclosure.

Next to this driveway, where gleaming luxury limousines had once been mobbed by onlookers and photographers, Pete's rather old but dearly loved MG pulled up, as it had the previous evening.

The Three Investigators got out of the car, walked up the marble steps towards the entrance and entered the foyer.

The foyer was still deserted except for two cloakroom attendants and three bartenders who were waiting for the theatre guests who would soon be pouring out. The staff seemed so preoccupied with themselves that no one took the slightest notice of the boys' arrival. Relieved at this, The Three Investigators inconspicuously approached the small door through which the theatre manager had led them to Miss Pixie's dressing room the previous evening. Jupe opened the door and entered the narrow corridor.

"We're well on time, fellas," The First Investigator murmured to his friends as they headed for the stairs. "Do you hear that? The final applause and music are going on right now."

"Up we go then!" Pete pushed his way forward and took two steps at a time as he climbed the stairs. Once at the top, he was suddenly no longer in such a hurry. Hesitantly, he stopped and waited impatiently for his friends to arrive.

"What's the matter?" Bob wondered as he approached. "First you couldn't get up here fast enough and now you're suddenly standing here as if your courage had left you!"

Pete reacted calmly. "Quite the opposite! The answer to your question is—I don't want Miss Pixie to escape through some back exit. However, I'm just wondering what we should say to the other actors if they want to know why we're hanging around here?"

"It's easy, Pete!" Panting, Jupiter had now also reached the upper floor. "The autograph thing always works with actors!"

"Very reassuring," Pete replied cynically. "We didn't get one from Miss Pixie last night, Jupe."

"So that will be our reason." Jupiter paused for a moment, pricked up his ears and listened in the direction of the stairs. "The applause has died down and the music is no longer playing either. So off to our diva's dressing room!"

When they reached their destination, Bob suddenly looked a little tense. "Our approach is a little different this time," he whispered softly. "So do we do it the discreet way, by politely waiting here outside the door for our star, or do we prefer the pushy way?"

Pete had already made a decision. Determined, he approached the door and knocked on it not very discreetly.

As on the previous evening, there was no response.

“So it’s a matter of waiting, fellas... and we should do it the discreet way.” Bob could not think of anything else.

However, Pete did. Without hesitation, he grasped the doorknob and turned it. Surprisingly, the door was unlocked this time and opened without any problem, accompanied by a soft squeak.

“Open sesame...” Pete grinned furtively, while Jupiter noticed with a glance that the wardrobe was empty.

Without thinking about it, the Second Investigator entered the room and instinctively approached the dressing table, on which was placed the photo of Miss Pixie’s daughter last night. Now it was not there! Before he could wonder about it, he suddenly heard a noise that made him jump around in fright. Another door had opened on the right side of the room. Miss Pixie was now standing there.

With quick steps, she rushed up and grabbed Pete brusquely by the arm. “What are you doing here?” she hissed as her long fingernails dug into his skin.

The Second Investigator was so taken by surprise that he could not for the life of him think of a plausible reply.

“We’d like your autograph, ma’am!” Jupiter came to his rescue and entered the dressing room with Bob as well.

The actress looked up in surprise. “Wait a minute... I know you guys.”

“That’s right, Miss Pixie,” Bob said. “We were here yesterday after we had the honour of watching your performance at the première. Unfortunately we couldn’t get your autograph because of the reporters for the weekly newspaper came in.”

Miss Pixie let go of Pete’s arm and was visibly flattered. Her tone changed from one second to the next into a beguiling whistle. “You really liked my performance so much that you came back again today? That fills me with joy! I always give one hundred per cent, I must say in all modesty. Half measures are out of the question for me!”

“That’s true,” Pete said, rubbing his aching arm.

The self-centred actress ignored the remark and threw her head back theatrically. “Yesterday’s première had taken a lot out of me emotionally, but after tonight’s second performance, I’m a bit more relaxed. May I therefore invite you to have a drink in the foyer? I just need to change and then I’ll join you in a moment.” She smiled proudly. “I’ll bring the autograph cards!”

She threw a gallant kiss on the hand to The Three Investigators, who were completely caught off guard. Then the actress pushed the three of them briskly towards the door. “I only need five minutes!”

Five minutes later, the boys were at the foyer, sitting at a small corner table, waiting impatiently for the actress to arrive. Many theatre-goers had also gathered here today to talk about the performance or to end the evening comfortably with a glass of wine.

Pete stretched his neck to look past the crowd for Miss Pixie. He noted that, so far, of the members of the ensemble, only Miss Shatner had shown up at the bar, sipping her cocktail eagerly.

“Are you really sure she’ll show up?” asked Pete. “Maybe she’s smelled a rat and is already thinking of a way to get rid of us once and for all, if you know what I mean...”

Bob frowned at Pete. "Is the great sceptic in you coming out again now, Pete? Take a deep breath and let's see what happens."

"That's easy for you to say!" Pete replied, pointing to the scratch marks on his left arm. "That old feline has pretty sharp claws! Don't think I'm going to put up with that! And if I ___"

"Here I am, young gentlemen!"

Pete broke off abruptly and was startled. Out of nowhere, Miss Pixie suddenly stood in front of them, wearing sunglasses whose lenses were so dark that they could not recognize her.

Jupiter rose and obligingly pointed to the free plush armchair, on which the diva immediately sat down.

"Have you ordered your drinks yet? Frankly, I'm pretty thirsty." She waved the three autograph cards in her hand like a fan to get some air. "The hot stage lights give us actors a hard time."

"We preferred to wait for you, ma'am," Jupiter replied quickly, "but knowing our friend Pete, I'm sure it will be a great honour for him to take care of the drinks. Won't you, Pete?"

"How? Er... yes, of course! Orange juice for everyone?"

"Hold on a minute!" Miss Pixie snapped at him. "You want me to get a severe attack?"

The Second Investigator could not believe his ears. "What do you mean by that?"

"I suffer from an extreme allergy to citrus fruits, the acidity of which turns my skin into a rather repulsive moon crater landscape in seconds!" she snapped out loud. "I'll just have water!"

Pete was annoyed. How was he to know that? In any case, with a good face, Pete followed the request and placed the order with the bartender. When he returned from the counter, he gave Jupiter a venomous look. "The drinks will be here in a few minutes!"

"Then I can give you the autograph cards," cooed Miss Pixie, passing out the glossy photos as if they were signed blank cheques.

The First Investigator thanked her and then got to the heart of what he wanted to ask: "By the way, ma'am, we read the article in the weekly newspaper today. We were fascinated not only by your interview, but also by a photo in which—"

"The newspaper has published it already?" Miss Pixie exclaimed so loudly that several theatre guests turned to look at her curiously.

"You can hardly call *The Weekender* a proper newspaper," Pete couldn't help himself but Miss Pixie was far too busy with herself to notice his remark.

"Do you happen to have a copy with you?" She looked at the boys invitingly.

Before Jupiter complied with her request, he pulled out a business card from his shirt pocket and slid it across the table to Miss Pixie. It said:



“*The Weekender*, please!” the actress yelled, without paying the slightest attention to the card. “Give it to me! I really need to see the article!” To lend emphasis to her demand, she took off her sunglasses and looked imploringly at Jupiter.

The First Investigator then prepared to pull out the folded newspaper when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye that he at first thought was a sensory illusion. His gaze lingered on a young girl. She was standing unaccompanied at the other end of the foyer, staring into space.

“There! That’s her!” Jupiter felt a rush of adrenaline. He jumped up from the chair and pointed excitedly in the direction of the girl.

“What? Who?” asked Pete, perplexed. He also rose to get a better view, and then he saw her. “The girl from the seventh row! The girl in the photo in Miss Pixie’s dressing room!” He narrowed his eyes into slits to see better into the distance. “No doubt about it, it’s her! And she’s wearing the same dark green dress again!”

9. Frantic Chase

When Miss Pixie also turned and saw the girl, her eyes widened in horror. “Aurora! Good heavens!”

The actress’s loud exclamation had drawn unnecessary attention. Many of the guests in the foyer turned around in fright, approached curiously and thus unintentionally formed a dense cluster that blocked the view of The Three Investigators and Miss Pixie.

“She must not escape us!” exclaimed Jupiter excitedly.

As if stung by a tarantula, the boys jumped from their chairs and hurriedly made their way through the guests.

Pete dashed forward and almost tripped over the walker of a frail old man. Then the girl reappeared in his field of vision. She had not changed her position and still remained near the wall next to a display case like a lifeless mannequin.

The girl’s strange appearance caused Pete to rethink. In the middle of his run, he stopped abruptly and fixed his eyes on the girl. Should he really grab her by the scruff of the neck and drag her to her supposed mother? Before he could make a sensible decision, he heard Jupiter’s panting voice behind him.

“What’s the matter, Pete? Why have you stopped here?”

Then Bob came rushing up and, noticing Pete’s sudden pause, he also stopped. The distance between The Three Investigators and the girl was no more than five metres.

“Has she created a protective shield around herself or what’s going on, Pete?” Bob wanted to know. He ventured a cautious step forward and took a closer look at the girl. “Tell me, fellas... is she moving at all or is that a mannequin?”

“Aurora!”

Pete turned around and saw Miss Pixie hurrying up.

“Get to her, boys! I can’t lose her again!” Breathlessly, the actress came closer.

Jupiter and Bob also turned briefly to look at Miss Pixie—but it was a big mistake! At that moment, the girl turned and ran across the foyer towards a door as if she was chased by the devil.

Pete was the first to react and sprinted after her at record-breaking speed. However, the girl was fast! The Second Investigator saw her push open the door, flee into the corridor behind and run around a corner.

Pete stayed on her heels. He also reached the door, went into the corridor, turned the corner and—

“Stop, young man! Where are you going?” A southern-looking woman in a white smock blocked his way with one outstretched leg.

“The girl! Is she... is she in there?” Pete gestured to one of the two closed doors, one of which was labelled ‘Ladies’ and the other ‘Gentlemen’.

“That’s right, the little señorita is in there!” She calmly popped a gum bubble between her lips. “Anything else?”

“You have to let me in there!” he begged the cleaning lady. “—Otherwise she might escape through the window!”

“Easy there, sport!” she retorted. “That’s the ladies’ room and I can clearly see that you are not a lady!”

Footsteps hurried up from the entrance of the long corridor. It was Jupiter and Bob, followed by the breathless Miss Pixie.

“Aurora! Aurora!” Desperation was written all over the actress’s face. “Where’s my baby?”

“The señorita in the dark green dress?” the cleaning lady asked.

Miss Pixie nodded excitedly.

“She’s in there!” Pete answered instead. “—But the lady here won’t let me in there!”

“Señora Dominguez, if you please, but you can call me Conchita,” she said. “In any case, I can’t let you guys in there!”

“Now get out of the way!” Without consideration, Miss Pixie vigorously pushed aside Señora Dominguez, pushed open the door to the ladies’ room, and hurried inside.

The Three Investigators strained their ears. They heard multiple door slams, Miss Pixie’s desperate call for her daughter and more door slams. Then the actress returned to the corridor. Her face spoke volumes.

“What are you doing?” Señora Dominguez did not understand the situation.

Miss Pixie was close to tears. “What is being played here? And where is my daughter? Did you see Aurora come in here or not?”

“Your daughter?” Señora Dominguez enquired in astonishment. She gave the actress a scrutinizing look. “I don’t want to offend you, ma’am, but the little señorita seemed a little too young for that.” Inevitably she had to grin. “—Or are you all a fun team with a hidden camera?”

“We are in no mood for fun, Conchita,” Jupiter replied. “We absolutely have to track down that girl! If necessary, we have to call in the police!”

“That’s enough, okay?” Señora Dominguez burst out laughing. “Do you think I’m crazy? Of course the señorita is in there! She went right past me here and that was less than two minutes ago!”

“And what if she stormed out through the window?” Jupiter wondered.

Señora Dominguez shook her head. “There are no windows in there, just like in the men’s room. The fresh air comes through the vents and they are as narrow as a beer mat...”

“—But if Miss Pixie claims that there is no one in the toilet,” Bob now intervened in the debate, “then—”

“Then it doesn’t mean anything!” Pete could no longer hold back.

A brief twitch ran through the corner of Miss Pixie’s mouth. “What do you mean?” She looked at Pete suspiciously.

“Quite simple,” replied the Second Investigator. “With my own eyes, I saw her run in here. Then Conchita insisted that the girl went into the ladies’ room. So I don’t believe your words, ma’am, until I see for myself that she is not in there.”

“That’s right, of course she’s in there! Or do you think I’ve hidden her in my cleaning cupboard?” With that, Señora Dominguez opened the two doors of the narrow cupboard. Apart from a few towels and two spray bottles of detergent, there was nothing inside. Then she closed the doors and spat her chewing gum into a bin. “And now we’re all going to look in the ladies’ room together—but only as an exception!”

There was nobody in the toilet room.

While Miss Pixie struggled to fight back tears and Señora Dominguez shook her head in bewilderment, The Three Investigators tried to find a hatch, a hidden cavity or some other hiding place where the girl could have gone to... but without the slightest success.

“I understand that... who wants to...” Jupiter pinched nervously at his lower lip. “If it weren’t so absurd, one could almost assume that the girl would have vanished into thin air.”

Bob paused. “Speaking of vanishing into thin air...” He spun around once. “Where is Miss Pixie?”

“The old lady? But... but she was just there,” Conchita said and looked around. “She was standing right next to me!”

“I saw that too, Conchita!” Pete confirmed. “—But now she’s gone! Vanished without a trace as well!”

10. A Difficult Woman

“What on earth is going on here?” a dark male voice suddenly sounded.

The Three Investigators turned around, startled. Unnoticed, Mr Furlough was standing at the doorway of the ladies’ room and was now looking around in amazement.

“First the señorita disappears,” Señora Dominguez began, “then the old lady—”

“Who has disappeared?” The theatre manager listened with interest. “I was informed by Fallon, the cloakroom attendant. He said that there was a commotion in the foyer. Then, he saw a couple of hoodlums chase a young girl in here. Am I correct in assuming that they were you? ... Wait a minute, I know you—you were here yesterday!”

Bob nodded silently.

“And where did this girl go?” Mr Furlough asked.

“That’s exactly the point, sir!” Pete exclaimed. “The girl as well as Miss Pixie have disappeared—here from the ladies’ room!”

“Well, at least as far as Miss Pixie is concerned, I can reassure you she just bumped into me in the foyer. She was, for whatever reason, quite beside herself! And what girl are we talking about?”

Bob was about to start an explanation, but the First Investigator quickly beat him to it. “Could we perhaps continue this conversation in your office? Our jackets are still hanging over the chairs in the foyer, and before they get lost—”

“I see, boys. No problem. My office is open to you.”

However, Señora Dominguez understood the situation. “Got that too,” she commented dryly. “Nothing for foreign ears... but it doesn’t matter to me. The main thing is that you don’t pull the wool over my eyes and make me responsible for the señorita’s disappearance. I’m telling you that I do my job properly and I don’t let anyone say bad things about me.” With these words, she went out of the toilet.

Just then, Jupiter called out to her: “Hold on, Conchita! I have one question for you. Just to be able to actually rule out all the other possibilities—could the girl have run into the men’s room instead of the ladies’?”

Señora Dominguez laughed hollowly. “Well, I would have stopped her! If you don’t want to believe me, go and see for yourself!”

The Three Investigators immediately went towards the men’s room. In front of the door was a sign that said: ‘Cleaning in Progress’. They proceeded into the room. A quick glance revealed that no one was in there as well. So it remained an unsolved mystery how the girl had managed to slip away unnoticed.

Without exaggeration, the manager’s office could have been described as a room full of junk. The desk was cluttered with textbooks, stacks of invoices, old banana peels, magazines, used coffee cups and an ashtray in which the stubbed-out cigarette ends were already piling up. The crammed bookshelves were bursting at the seams and on the worn carpet lay various plastic bags from which all kinds of odds and ends were spilling out.

“A real artist’s office,” Bob remarked with amusement as he joined Jupiter and Pete on the sofa that Mr Furlough had cleared for his visitors.

On the way to the manager's office, The Three Investigators had quietly agreed that they would only give the manager as little information as necessary as far as Miss Pixie was concerned. First and foremost, they wanted to obtain information.

"Well, let's have it, boys!" Mr Furlough restarted the conversation after he had lit a cigarette and sat down behind the desk on a well-worn leather chair. "Now what was that ominous event that took place in the ladies' room? And what kind of girl is supposed to have suddenly disappeared—how and where?"

"Do you know Miss Pixie's story?" the First Investigator immediately tried a counter-question. "I mean the one that was in the press thirty-two years ago."

Mr Furlough puffed out his cheeks and then let the air escape, snorting. "Of course I know the..." He made a serious face. "Listen, boys, Miss Pixie is admittedly often exhausting and a little loopy. When I took over the running of this theatre a few years ago, I had a really hard time deciding whether to include her in the company."

He stubbed out half his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. "So far, fortunately, apart from the usual skirmishes, there have been no really serious incidents with her. But if all the fuss about her missing daughter starts up again, as it did then, I'd have to seriously ask myself whether she's tenable in my ensemble anymore."

"What do you mean?" The First Investigator's ears perked up. "Would you consider terminating her contract?"

The manager cleared his throat. "That depends..."

"—On what?"

"Among other things, what I would like to know from you for a change—what about the girl you were looking for in the ladies' room? Is there a connection with Miss Pixie's story about her missing daughter?"

"You can't put it like that," the First Investigator answered evasively, "but probably my two friends and I have made a grave mistake."

"—And what is that?" the manager did not let up.

"We saw a girl in the foyer earlier who bears a certain resemblance to Miss Pixie's daughter, as she looks in an old photograph. Foolishly, I couldn't help pointing it out to the actress..."

Mr Furlough uttered an exasperated sound. "So that's why she was so upset. You've really done a great job. Congratulations! Then what?"

"We immediately approached the girl," Jupiter declared truthfully. "She ran and we chased after her."

"You what?" The manager couldn't believe it.

"We are truly sorry, sir. To make matters worse, we then lost sight of the girl and thus embarrassed Conchita as well."

"Conchita?" pondered Mr Furlough. "Oh, you mean Señora Dominguez! You needn't worry about her. She has been employed in this theatre for over twenty years, and she has seen far worse things here."

"That's good to know," Jupiter replied with a smirk. "Nevertheless, we must formally apologize to you and especially to Miss Pixie for this mix-up, sir, and I would like to point out once again that it is entirely our fault that the old stories have been rekindled."

"Does Miss Pixie know that too, or is it going to be my job once again to spend hours dealing with her to restore her composure? I hope you have also made that clear to her and apologized to her."

"Well, we have not seen her since," Bob replied meekly, "but we'll make up for it as soon as possible."

Mr Furlough smiled conciliatorily. "Not tonight, boys. A while ago in the foyer, she pretended to have a bad migraine. She wanted to go straight home and go to bed."

"Understandable, after all the unnecessary commotion we've caused," Jupiter admitted guiltily. "I'm just highlighting this again in case you should actually consider giving her notice because of this incident."

"No, no," said the manager. "However, this incident might well have been the last straw if you had not set the record straight."

Bob remained demonstratively calm. "We already experienced yesterday that Miss Pixie is not exactly the easiest to handle, but what—"

"I have seldom before met a woman as engaging as her. You can take my word for it." Mr Furlough lit another cigarette. "From her point of view, she is not only a gifted actress, but also an unsung director, dramatist, set designer and author all rolled into one—if you can get an idea of what I mean by that."

"She always gives one hundred percent!" Pete remarked sarcastically.

The manager smiled wryly. "Stop it, or I might change my mind about giving her notice!"

"Is it really that bad?" Bob wanted to know.

"Worse! Add to that her paranoia that she smells a conspiracy around every corner, which of course is always directed exclusively against her. Everyone here is supposedly out to get her out of the ensemble, including me. How many times has she come to see me here in my office over the years because she's supposedly heard that I'm planning not to cast her in the next play?"

"—And that was never the case?" Jupiter inquired.

The manager began nervously fiddling with a lighter. "Shall I give you an example of the effort I go through for her? In our current play, there was originally no suitable role for Miss Pixie, which meant I wouldn't have had to cast her. Guess what I did to avoid having to listen to her whining?"

The Three Investigators looked questioningly at Mr Furlough.

"I rewrote the male lead of the inspector to a female inspector before the play was announced and the scripts handed out, so that madame wouldn't burst into tears! Any more questions?"

"One more, if you don't mind," Jupiter replied as he rose heavily from the couch and joined Mr Furlough at the desk. "We now know from you that you have a positive attitude towards Miss Pixie, despite her self-centred nature, and that she is a permanent member of your theatre ensemble. I'm sure you meant her no harm."

The manager's eyelids began to flutter. "What are you getting at?"

"Do you think it possible that another member of your theatre company would go so far as to do something that might cause Miss Pixie to leave on her own accord?"

Mr Furlough could only shake his head at this. "That shrewd woman has actually used you for her own interests and you obviously haven't noticed." Again he shook his head. "I can give the all-clear. Several meetings have already taken place in which I discussed with my ensemble whether Miss Pixie, with her exalted manner, is acceptable in our team."

"Oh?" Pete looked up with interest. "—And what came of it?"

"Everyone agreed that without her, the theatre would lack... how should I put it... 'spirit'."

"So she's sort of the heart of the theatre that everyone hates and loves at the same time," Jupiter added. "So that's why no one here is interested in driving her out, right?"

The manager nodded. “That is correct! These conspiracy theories are complete nonsense, pure fantasies...”

11. Emergency Call

“Pure fantasies...” the Second Investigator quoted Mr Furlough’s last words the next afternoon.

The three boys had gathered at Headquarters to debate yesterday’s incidents and to discuss how to proceed with the case.

“So... as far as Miss Pixie’s bullying fantasies are concerned, the manager’s statement may have been correct... but the fact that the girl in Miss Pixie’s photograph actually turned up at the City Theatre, and for the second time—that is not a fantasy!” The Second Investigator fell into thoughtful silence.

“In my opinion, Mr Furlough answered our questions honestly and in good conscience last night,” Jupiter took the floor. “However, we did not tell him the true facts about the appearance of Miss Pixie’s supposed daughter. Fortunately, I was able to fob him off with the explanation that there had been a mix-up, so of course, he didn’t realize that yesterday’s last question was aimed at finding out whether someone from the ensemble could have staged this haunting with Aurora. Surely his answers would have been different if he had a hand in this.”

“I agree with you there,” Bob said after a moment’s consideration. “Since the conversation yesterday, it should also be clear that he simply wouldn’t have cast her again if he had intended to get rid of her. So it is unlikely that he had anything to do with the missing daughter suddenly reappearing.”

“What about the members of the ensemble?” Pete spoke up again. “Can Furlough really be sure that none of them want to get rid of Miss Pixie?”

“That’s right. We shouldn’t forget that the actor Roy Sanders did that nasty thing with the gun during the opening night performance,” Bob reminded his friends. “That wasn’t in her imagination either. After all, we all saw it happen on stage.”

“—Which is a trifle compared to the appearance of Miss Pixie’s daughter,” Jupiter added, lost in thought.

“That girl...” Pete was overcome by an uneasy feeling. “Are you really sure, Juve, that according to all the laws of physics and logic it can’t be that she is Miss Pixie’s time-travelling daughter? What about all that particle accelerator stuff that you mentioned earlier?” He swallowed. “How do you explain that a person appears before our eyes who looks like the child in a thirty-two-year-old photograph? Then this person suddenly vanishes into thin air in a ladies’ toilet without a second exit!”

Two pairs of eyes looked expectantly in Jupiter’s direction.

However, the First Investigator was left with nothing but a resigned shrug. “It is out of the question for me to even consider the theory that Aurora has returned from the future after more than three decades... At the moment, I have no explanation for the events.”

“So,” said Bob, “we have to think—where did this girl appear from and, more importantly, why? Who derives any benefit from it? How could she disappear without a trace from a dead end with no apparent means of escape? Since we agree that neither Miss Pixie nor Mr Furlough is behind this, I think we can now rule out the ‘publicity’ motive.”

Jupiter nodded in agreement. “We have always been able to rely on our investigation instincts. Besides, I don’t trust Miss Pixie or Mr Furlough have enough acting talent to make

such a set-up believable. By the way, we can also cross another motive off our list, fellas.”

“And what would that be?” Bob asked.

“The intention to drive Miss Pixie mad, for whatever reason, Bob,” Jupiter replied. “because the fact that Aurora’s sudden appearance in the theatre took place in front of so many eyewitnesses simply speaks against it. What’s more, Aurora’s physical presence is now even on record thanks to the photo in the weekly newspaper. No one can now claim that Miss Pixie is suffering from hallucinations.”

Pete was at a loss. “So we continue to tread water with our investigations. We’d better —”

The shrill ringing of the telephone interrupted him.

The First Investigator picked up the handset and pressed the loudspeaker button. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Jupiter Jones,” an elderly woman’s voice sounded on the other end of the line. “Are you one of the three young gentlemen who asked me for an autograph yesterday in my theatre dressing room and—”

“Miss Pixie!” the First Investigator interrupted the actress. “Yes, yes, the three of us were with you yesterday. What can we do for you?”

Excited breathing sounded from the loudspeaker.

“Believe me... I... I wouldn’t have called the number on your card if I... if I wasn’t so desperate. I don’t know who else to turn to...”

“You did exactly the right thing, ma’am,” Jupiter tried to reassure the actress in a gentle tone. “How can we help you?”

Again Miss Pixie gasped. “Uh... Aurora... my daughter... she’s... I mean, she’s got—”

“Please, ma’am, take a deep breath. What about your daughter? ... Hello? Are you there? Please answer!”

The actress had great difficulty continuing. “You must... you must come to me... immediately! I really do not know what is happening now!”

12. Close to Madness

Hollywood Boulevard was one of the places in Los Angeles that attracted tourists like moths to a flame. Among the attractions were the Chinese Theatre, and the Walk of Fame, which honoured the most famous among the famous with golden stars on the pavement. Here, many performers offered themselves in the guise of famous personalities and characters such as Batman, Marilyn Monroe and Michael Jackson for a photo together. They had characterized the street scene for many decades and provided the special flair of this entertainment stretch.

When Miss Pixie had told The Three Investigators her address on the phone, the boys had been quite surprised that the actress could apparently afford to own or live in an apartment on this boulevard.

When they arrived there half an hour later and a completely distraught Miss Pixie invited them into her little realm, it quickly became clear that she was truly not wallowing in luxury. The tiny apartment, located in a ramshackle building on the first floor above a souvenir shop, was anything but luxurious. It was only equipped with the bare necessities. Thus, the actress gave The Three Investigators the impression that the posh address was more important to her than anything else and that she was even prepared to forego any kind of comfort for it.

After Miss Pixie had closed the door of the apartment, Pete suddenly stopped.

"Is something wrong?" the actress replied, eyeing the Second Investigator closely.

"I'm not quite sure..." Visibly embarrassed, he took a step back. "—But... is it possible that you've shrunk a little... well... I mean, since we last met?"

Miss Pixie paused bashfully as her eyelids began to flutter nervously. "Is it that obvious?"

Only now did Jupiter and Bob register that their friend seemed to be right in his observation. The elderly lady did indeed look a lot smaller and more petite than they remembered her.

"Your remark is not exactly flattering," she replied in a lowered voice, "but your keen powers of observation speak for you again. Unfortunately, Mother Nature didn't give me legs as long as I would have liked... but there is an easy solution for that, especially for women." She gestured to a knee-high shoe rack in the hallway, which held a dozen or so women's shoes with strikingly high heels.

"The new high heels I wore yesterday were probably a bit too small, though. I've got horrible blisters on my feet. So please forgive me for looking so short today. I usually would not appear to anyone like this."

The Three Investigators smiled sympathetically as Miss Pixie led them into a small living room and immediately expressed her concerns.

"You can't imagine what I've been through in the last forty-eight hours!" She ran a hand through her hair in exasperation. "I'm on the verge of losing it! And I don't mean my aching feet!"

"If you're referring to the sudden appearance of your daughter, who supposedly disappeared umpteen years ago, it's not surprising that you're in a state of disarray at the moment," Jupiter replied in a precocious manner. "However, something else seems to have happened since that girl disappeared yesterday, isn't it?"

Miss Pixie reacted to Jupiter's words in utter amazement. "How do you know about that? Who told you anything about it?"

"Wait a minute!" Pete interjected. "Why did you call us at our headquarters, ask for our help in a completely distraught state and then answer Jupe's question with a counter-question?"

"I... er... well..." she stammered, flustered, and looked questioningly at the three boys in turn.

"We recognized the girl in the newspaper as the one from the photo in your dressing room, ma'am," Bob came to Miss Pixie's rescue. "Since then we also know why you collapsed on stage on the opening night. So knowing your story and the girl's appearance in the theatre have made us suspicious as investigators."

With energetic steps, Miss Pixie approached the counter of the adjoining kitchenette, reached for *The Rocky Beach Weekender* and pointed to the photo in question. "I got a copy of this newspaper last night. The girl in the seventh row... at first, I really thought it was a case of mistaken identity... but when Aurora reappeared in the foyer and you chased her to the toilet... and..." she faltered. "When she was cornered and there was no other way out, she catapulted herself into another time... I had—" She faltered again.

"You had what?" the First Investigator wanted to know impatiently. "How could your daughter retain her childhood likeness for more than thirty years and has not aged biologically? You really believe that she has actually travelled through time?"

A brief, uncertain doubt flitted across Miss Pixie's face before it burst out of her excitedly: "Now don't you look at me as if there's something wrong in my mind! I've been through all that before." Her lips began to twitch uncontrollably. "I lost my daughter and my husband for these very reasons—because I just didn't believe in these fantasies!"

"What do you mean?" The Second Investigator was confused over Miss Pixie's last remark. "Do you now believe that your husband and daughter travelled to the future then?"

The actress squirmed like an eel and seemed to be fighting an inner battle with herself before she was able to respond. Several times she looked desperately at the ceiling as if the solution to the all-important question would be there. However, nothing could be gleaned from the scattered patches of dampness where the paint was crumbling from the plaster. Finally, she slumped her shoulders in resignation and let out a heavy sigh.

"I don't know," she finally said. "I don't know what to do. All I can say with certainty is that I would never tell the police, let alone the press or anyone else, about this again. Well... that's why I called you."

"And how do we get the honour of you trusting us, ma'am?" Jupiter asked.

Suddenly, Miss Pixie's eyes sparkled. "It's been years since I've been asked for an autograph by fans..." She looked bashfully at the floor. "When you came into my dressing room two days ago, it seemed almost like a revelation. Shortly before, I had seen Aurora sitting behind you in the auditorium... I was close to madness. Old wounds were tearing open again. I didn't want to believe it and for my own sanity, I convinced myself that I was the victim of a rotten plot.

"For a brief moment, I even considered whether you might be in cahoots with someone in the ensemble. However, when Aurora reappeared in the foyer the next evening... I realized from your reaction that you were sincere and would never do such a dastardly thing to me."

"That's good to hear," Jupiter replied, flattered. "Then let's now get to the question of why you called us so excitedly earlier and asked us to come here."

Miss Pixie crossed her arms demonstratively. "Before I tell you, I must make you promise not to speak to a soul about this. Absolute silence. Do you give me your word of

honour?”

“You can rely on us completely, ma’am,” Bob assured her. “Confidentiality is a top priority of us investigators. What on earth happened?”

The actress again pointed to the photo in *The Rocky Beach Weekender*. “This girl is my daughter and not a double. This became completely clear to me when she appeared in the foyer last night. In the end, she had no choice but to dematerialize in the ladies’ room after you chased and cornered her there.”

“But that’s—” Pete raised his voice in protest, but Jupiter put him in his place with a clear gesture of his hand.

“Go on, ma’am,” the First Investigator said.

“I didn’t sleep a wink last night and racked my brain as to why Aurora has suddenly returned after all this time. Surely she wants to tell me something, and this morning, when the sun rose, she lived up to her name...”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Pete asked uncertainly.

“The ancient Romans gave their goddess of the dawn the name Aurora,” Jupiter said in a scholarly manner. “So if I interpret your remark correctly, something inexplicable must have happened again at sunrise today, right?”

Miss Pixie nodded in agreement. “At the crack of dawn, she appeared to me in a dream and told me that the two of us would soon be reunited...”

“What?” Pete couldn’t believe his ears. “Because of a dream, you raised the alarm and summoned us here? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Would you please let me finish first!” she sneered at him impassively. “Only when complete would the meaning of an explanation be clear!”

To show her annoyance with Pete, she pointedly turned to Jupiter and Bob. “Aurora called me earlier—by phone, from the present! I’m fully aware that you won’t believe a word I say. After all, this is nothing new for me. Investigators need something tangible. You need facts for your investigations—like the photo in *The Weekender*.”

Bob scratched his chin. “Well, ma’am, I suppose you don’t have proof of the call...”

“Then you’re mistaken...” the actress replied and gestured to the small telephone table next to the couch.

13. A Hair's Breadth

Triumphantly, Miss Pixie approached the little table, pressed the rewind button on the answering machine and let the tape rewind.

Bob marvelled at the device. "A real museum piece! It still uses cassettes!"

"That's right," she replied proudly. "Flawless... and it has been for... uh... thirty-five years, at least." Then she pressed play.

The Three Investigators held their breath and listened.

"... I should have called earlier, Mum, I know," a tender child's voice sounded from the loudspeaker. The guilty conscience was clearly evident in her meek undertone. "—But Daddy said it was okay. You wouldn't believe all we've been through! It's totally crazy! I'll tell you about it later! The main thing is that you're not angry with us anymore..."

There was a crackle, followed by a busy signal. It was clear that the caller had hung up.

The actress pressed the stop button and looked at The Three Investigators with tear-filled eyes.

"That is the voice of Aurora!" she insisted forcefully, "without any doubt. Every syllable, every word is from my little daughter! As a mother, I not only know it, I can feel it down to my little toe!"

With erratic movements, she pulled out a handkerchief and wipe the tears off her eyes. "Now that she has finally returned, and once I hold her in my arms again, all the judges, experts and scientists who doubted my state of mind will look pretty stupid!"

"What exactly should we do for you now?" Jupiter asked.

"First and foremost, you are my witnesses! I have read up on you on the Internet and therefore I know that you have an excellent reputation. You are the only ones I can take into my confidence... and that's why I'm also giving you the task of protecting me and my daughter."

"Protect?" Bob repeated in surprise. "Why? And most importantly, from whom?"

Miss Pixie clenched her hand into a fist excitedly. "Isn't it obvious? I know the greedy media pack, and the government hacks, and all the great scientists. If they get wind of my daughter's return, they'll descend on us like locusts and target Aurora in particular! They might even take my daughter away from me so that they can carry out all kinds of examinations on her!"

The First Investigator decided to keep his cards covered for the time being. "Everything will be all right, ma'am... we will see to that. However, I urge you to remain calm. After all, you have another performance tonight, don't you?"

"That's right," she said, "but I don't know if I can go through with it..."

Bob then said encouragingly to her: "Oh, come on! You can do it! If not you, then who?"

"And you always give one hundred percent!" Pete added.

"All right..." She took a deep breath and gritted her teeth bravely. "What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"We will go back to our headquarters and discuss the next steps. If you encounter something unexpected, ma'am, we can always be reached via our mobile phone or the

landline in our office. Both numbers are on the back of our business card... or would you prefer Pete to stay with you here?"

As if struck by lightning, Pete stared at the First Investigator, speechless.

"The offer sounds tempting," Miss Pixie replied hesitantly, "but I have to meditate until the performance. Telephone contact will do just fine."

The Second Investigator was immediately relieved.

"Then we might as well say goodbye to you now, ma'am." Jupiter politely held out his hand to her, but Miss Pixie did not register this, as she was too preoccupied with her thoughts. "Just one more thing..." the First Investigator then told the actress, "what applies to us investigators naturally applies to you in this matter."

This time she heard him. "And what would that be?" she asked in surprise.

Jupiter looked her firmly in the eye. "Absolute silence. Whatever happens, don't let anyone get you to say a single word about Aurora's return." He raised his eyebrows. "Can we count on that?"

"Piece of cake!" She winked at him teasingly. "You know me—once an actress, always an actress!"

The Three Investigators were about to leave the apartment when Jupiter saw a small envelope in the alcove next to the main door. On it was handwritten:

To G. Pixie—Strictly Confidential

Jupiter hesitated, but then could not contain his curiosity.

"It's not usually my style, ma'am, to interfere in other people's private matters, but did you notice this envelope lying here on the floor?"

Miss Pixie looked down and discovered what Jupiter had pointed out to her. She came to the door, bent down with interest, and picked up the envelope. "Someone must have slipped this under my door when I was out just now. It wasn't there this morning when I was vacuuming. I know that for sure."

"Is there a return address on it?" Bob asked.

"No," the old lady said as she undid the taped flap and pulled out a white card. There was only one sentence on it and it was formed with cut-out newspaper letters:

YOU WILL FIND THE ANSWERS TO ALL YOUR QUESTIONS IN YOUR CUPBOARD.

She furrowed her eyebrows in astonishment, handed the card to the First Investigator, turned around and stepped resolutely towards her cupboard with quick steps.

"What on earth does this mean?" Bob asked.

Before any of The Three Investigators could stop her, she pulled the little porcelain knob, opened the wooden door with a jerk and—

"Look out!" cried Jupiter in panic. With one leap, he jumped towards Miss Pixie to push the horrified woman aside. However, he was not fast enough. A violent jet had already shot out of the cupboard just above the actress's head, and splashed on and ran down a wall mirror hanging opposite. It was a light-yellowish liquid.

The actress was incapable of any movement. With her eyes wide open, she stared stunned into the interior of the cupboard. A water pistol, the trigger of which was attached to the cupboard door with a cord, was stuck between the upper shelves.

"Are you hurt?" With his heart pounding, Pete had rushed to the actress's aid and was looking at her worriedly.

However, she did not seem to have registered what had just happened. “I... I’m okay,” were the only words Miss Pixie was able to utter.

Jupiter, on the other hand, approached the mirror and carefully smelled the liquid running down. “It just missed by a hair’s breadth, otherwise Miss Pixie’s face would have been quite disfigured for a while at least!”

“So it’s an insidious acid attack,” Pete let out in shock as he risked a cautious glance inside the cupboard. “It would probably take major treatments to make a burnt face look halfway decent again—over months.”

The First Investigator stroked the wet surface of the mirror with his fingertip and then wetted the tip of his tongue with it. “I stand by my assertion, fellas. However, the culprit was only concerned with incapacitating his victim for a limited period of time. That is why he chose an acid whose effect wears off relatively quickly. After a short taste test, I dare to claim that this is lemon juice!”

“Lemon juice?” exclaimed Pete. “Miss Pixie’s allergy to citrus!”

“That’s right.” Jupiter put his hand on Miss Pixie’s shoulder reassuringly. “Your too-tight high heels have saved you, ma’am.” He now approached the cupboard as well and examined the contraption. “The culprit had installed the water pistol filled with lemon juice at your head level... but he obviously based it on your height with your high heels. You escaped unscathed because, for once, you weren’t wearing them!”

The old lady sank down on the armchair and wiped her sweaty forehead. “What is going on here? Aurora’s appearance in the theatre, her phone message, and now this terrible attack! Why is all this happening?”

Meanwhile, Jupiter was examining the white card and he held it very close to his face. “Hmm...” he remarked.

“What is it, Juve?” Bob asked. “You noticed something?”

“Later,” was all the First Investigator said. Then he turned to the actress and asked: “Miss Pixie, could I keep this card in the meantime. I need to examine it closely.”

“Sure,” Miss Pixie replied. “I can’t do anything with it.”

“We must get the police involved immediately!” Pete urged. “Who knows what this maniac is planning next! After this, another attack may be on his agenda.”

“No police!” Miss Pixie refused to be ruffled. “You know very well what bad experiences I’ve had with law enforcement! Besides, I hired you as investigators! Therefore, leave the police out of it! Do we understand each other? Whoever is targeting me won’t get me so easily!”

In view of the vehemence with which the actress lent emphasis to her voice, Jupiter finally gave in and agreed. “All right, ma’am. No police for the time being. Nevertheless, I must agree with Pete and urge you to reconsider this decision thoroughly and calmly. Once the culprit discovers that his treacherous plot has failed, he will not shrink from devising another attack.”

“Fine. I’ll think about it,” she replied curtly and rose from her chair. “However, there is one thing that makes me wonder about your investigation.”

“And what would that be?” Bob asked.

“Since when have private investigators been interested in involving the police in their investigations? Are you not confident of your capabilities?”

“On the contrary, ma’am,” Jupiter firmly dismissed this insinuation. “In this case, I would like to make use of some of the technical capabilities of the police.”

Miss Pixie stamped her foot in anger. “I make the rules around here! No police! If they find out that Aurora—”

“It’s good that you bring it up on your own,” Jupiter interrupted her, “because we won’t breathe a word about your daughter’s sudden appearance—that we give you our word of honour, otherwise we will not succeed in finally shedding light on this dark matter.”

14. Unconnected Cases?

When Pete arrived at Headquarters for the meeting the next afternoon, Jupiter and Bob were already there.

The Second Investigator's mood was only mediocre. "You're lucky I've been assigned to mow the lawn at home this morning, Jupe. It was an excellent way for me to relieve stress and anger. You should do that for a change instead of just creating trouble!"

"Trouble?" Jupiter put on a true innocent face. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about?"

"As I said, I was able to regain my ever-so-appreciated poise while mowing the lawn, so now I'm going to explain to you in my most calm voice what you must never do to me again!"

Bob looked back and forth between Jupiter and Pete. "Tell me, have I missed anything?" he asked.

The Second Investigator looked accusingly in Jupiter's direction. "No matter what events we experienced with Miss Pixie yesterday, don't you ever think of offering me to her—or anybody for that matter—as a personal bodyguard ever again! Understand? If one of us is going to protect her, it's not going to be me in this case! Are we clear?"

"Oh, that's what you mean!" the First Investigator waved calmly. "I thought that since you work out a lot, you might want to flex your muscles once in a while to protect someone."

"No way!" Pete parried sarcastically, stroking his well-toned belly self-consciously. "What I do with my physique is by no means for that purpose!"

Bob began to tap his foot restlessly. "If you have finished, I'd like to go back to business and remind you that Miss Pixie only escaped a lemon juice attack yesterday by a hair's breadth! Now that we're all here, Jupe, can you please tell us what you discussed with Cotta this morning."

"With Cotta?" Pete was now back on the subject. "Is this about the 'technical capabilities' that you mentioned yesterday when you tried to insinuate our client into your grand scheme of things?"

The First Investigator nodded. "That's right. The inspector has already taken up the matter and agreed to monitor Miss Pixie's telephone line. She herself has also given her consent for this."

"Excuse me?" asked Pete sceptically. "The police is tapping into her line? What for? How did you manage to get the inspector and especially Miss Pixie to agree on that?"

Jupiter grinned broadly. "By making it plausible to the two of them that the culprit might make a phone call to our client to make sure his attack was successful."

"A very questionable assumption," Bob replied with a frown.

"That's right." Jupiter put his hands together. "In fact, I don't in the least expect the culprit to contact Miss Pixie in this way either."

"Huh?" Pete wondered. "Then what's the point of all this?"

"In case you haven't forgotten, we are working on two cases at the moment and I am extremely sure that the lemon juice attack and the return of the time-travelling Aurora are not

directly connected. Before I comment further, I would like your opinion on the child's voice on Miss Pixie's answering machine. What do you say, fellas?"

"Probably nothing at all," Pete replied uncertainly. "That actress swears by all accounts that it's her daughter—her twelve-year-old daughter, and at least I didn't get the impression that someone was deliberately disguising the voice to sound child-like. In the movies, it is often the case that child actors are dubbed by adult actors because the little ones are not yet able to convey their lines convincingly. In such cases, you can usually hear that because the voices seem artificial somehow. This is not the case with the voice on the answering machine, or have I expressed myself in a too complicated way now?"

"I know exactly what you're getting at, Pete," Bob agreed with his friend. "I am also convinced that there was no adult voice impersonator at work. The voice sounded like a young girl's—completely authentic and unforced. There was nothing read or acted. The only question is—if it wasn't Aurora who called Miss Pixie yesterday, who was it? Perhaps someone who has a voice that sounds the same? Fellas, for once I believe Miss Pixie's words this time. As a mother, she knows, or, as she thinks, even senses it. Since she is one hundred percent sure that she recognizes the voice, we should accept that as a fact, regardless of whether logic throws a spanner in the works or not."

The Second Investigator sat down thoughtfully on the couch with Bob and began to ponder: "There appears before our eyes a girl who has been missing for more than thirty-two years and who looks exactly like the one in the old photograph of the child in Miss Pixie's dressing room. Even the clothes are identical. Shortly afterwards, this girl disappears without a trace from a toilet from which there is really no other way out. Then she calls her mother the next day, seemingly coming back from the future to tell her something."

A deep wrinkle formed on Pete's forehead. "How do you explain this phenomenon, when we all agree that there is actually no such thing as time travel?"

15. Blackmail

“Exactly. There is no such thing as time travel, Pete,” the First Investigator now intervened emphatically in the conversation.

“Unfortunately, I still don’t have a plausible explanation for the girl’s appearance and disappearance...” Jupiter continued, “but I do see a small light at the end of the tunnel as far as the voice in the phone call to Miss Pixie is concerned—‘sounds the same’ and ‘is the same’ are not the same. In this case, it does not just ‘sounds the same’ but in fact, it ‘is the same’.”

“Huh?” Bob looked disturbingly at Pete. “Do you have any idea what our mastermind is trying to tell us?”

“Not a clue.” The Second Investigator also had to pass. “Maybe we should try kneeling down so that he’ll take pity on us and interpret his jargon so that even mere mortals can understand him.”

“Okay, okay...” Jupiter decided to spare his friends from paying him submissive homage. “I am absolutely certain that the mastermind behind the ominous call did not need to hire a girl with a voice that is strikingly similar to Aurora’s. I would like to point out that the chances of finding such a voice are probably less than one in a million, so we can safely put this theory to rest.

“To make Miss Pixie believe that the caller was her daughter who had returned from the future and had therefore not aged, all it took was an amazingly simple trick. I figured that out, Bob, because earlier in your conclusions, you mentioned someone who has a voice that ‘sounds the same’.

“However, each person has a voice that is distinct and different from everyone else’s, just like fingerprints. Although human voices are unique, we’re not that good at recognizing them, unless when it comes to your closest family and friends. Well, we can use computer technology, but that’s another thing altogether.

“So using an almost similar sounding voice could have enabled Miss Pixie to expose it as a hoax. The unknown person behind this could not and would not take that risk. So fellas, for me, the case is quite clear—the voice does not just sound the same, but in fact, it is the same, meaning that it is the real voice.”

“—Of Aurora?” asked Bob, puzzled. “You mean the voice is that of the real Aurora?”

Jupiter nodded. “I am convinced of that.”

“But... but then she must have returned from the future!” Pete exclaimed. “After all, no person is capable of retaining a child’s voice for more than thirty years.”

Jupiter nodded again. “Right, Pete—not a person, but a technical device. When I think of Miss Pixie’s old answering machine, which, according to her, still hasn’t malfunctioned after more than thirty-five years, we have found the source of Aurora’s child’s voice in that very machine!”

“Wait a minute...” Bob reflected. “Thirty-five years ago, Miss Pixie’s daughter was... uh... nine years old. There’s a good chance she left messages on this machine quite often.”

“That’s right, Bob!” The First Investigator was visibly in his element. “—And one of these old tapes with Aurora’s messages to her mother will have enabled our unknown person

to play his trick. It remains to be seen how and when he got hold of that tape.”

“Above all, if your theory is correct, Juve, how we can put a stop to that rotten guy,” Pete asked, “and what about the girl in the theatre? She has to be in it as well. So we have to get hold of her. Then everything else will be child’s play!”

“All correct, Pete,” Jupiter replied, “and that’s where Cotta comes in!”

As if on cue, the phone rang at that moment.

Jupiter lifted the handset and pressed the loudspeaker button. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Cotta here!” a familiar voice announced.

“Inspector!” With excitement, Jupiter began to tug at the telephone cord. “I didn’t expect such a quick callback. You haven’t already—”

“A call was received by Miss Pixie this morning which could be described as extremely strange.”

Jupiter’s heartbeat began to quicken, but he made every effort to give his voice a neutral tone. “What do you mean, Inspector?”

“That was a call from a young girl who told the actress that she was quite upset that no one was taking her seriously. Then suddenly there was talk of New York and a change of school. I didn’t quite understand that... but even less so Miss Pixie’s reaction to that call.”

“Could you explain that in more detail?” Jupiter probed.

“Well... the old lady ended the conversation rather abruptly and completely without a word.” Cotta took a deep breath. “The whole thing is very strange, and I don’t really believe that it has anything to do with the lemon juice attack. Maybe you can tell me something about it.”

The First Investigator forced himself inwardly to calm down. “I believe that the young girl’s phone call is not connected with the lemon juice attack on Miss Pixie, Inspector. That’s a different matter altogether. The call could be some sort of a prank. In any case, it would be very kind of you to let us know the address from which that call was made. Then we could see to it that the old lady is no longer harassed in this way. The police don’t have to take care of something trivial like that.”

A throat clearing sounded from the loudspeaker. “I don’t have to tell you that I’m not supposed to pass such information on to you. There are data protection laws to adhere to. However, as you believe that this is just a stupid prank call, I will make a laudable exception. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“I understand fully, Inspector,” Jupiter replied. “This is an exception.”

“So take notes, you pest,” he replied in a harsh tone, “so that I can finally take my break, because my stomach is already growling like an attack dog.”

“Pen and paper are ready, sir. Please proceed!”

A short beep of a computer sounded from the other end of the line. “The young girl’s call was made from the Cotton Bay Hotel on West Katella Avenue in Anaheim—just a stone’s throw from the Disneyland Resort... and it’s from Room 307, currently occupied by a certain Mrs McVerry.”

Hastily, the First Investigator scribbled the address on a small notepad, while Bob and Pete stepped closer in disbelief and gave their friend admiring glances.

“You have done us a great service,” Jupiter praised the inspector effusively. “Of course, we will treat this information with the utmost discretion, but for now, I wish you a good appetite! See you later!”

“Yes, yes,” was all Cotta said and he ended the call.

When Jupiter hung up the phone, he was beaming with excitement. “Fellas, how did I do?”

“For sure, you have the inspector eating out of your hand, my dear friend...” Bob commented. “There’s one thing though, how on earth did you know that the girl would call our client again?”

“I had a hunch,” he replied with a broad grin.

“So,” Pete laughed, “when are we going to the Cotton Bay Hotel to visit Aurora and company? In any case, I’m still not quite sure why you are certain that these creepy calls have nothing to do with the lemon juice attack on Miss Pixie!”

“I will let you know at the appropriate time, fellas.” Jupiter cast a searching glance at his watch. “If the evening traffic permits, we should be there in an hour in Pete’s MG.”

There were several hotels on West Katella Avenue in Anaheim, all vying for the attention of the many tourists who wanted to visit the Disneyland Resort. The Cotton Bay Hotel with its pink façade was no exception. The Three Investigators realized this even before they entered the large reception hall. Children and adults with Mickey Mouse ears were at the driveway, having just came back from the amusement park.

The trail was hot, yet the boys had not yet worked out a precise plan of how they would proceed. They wanted to decide on the spot. For this reason, the first thing they did was to enter the reception hall and get an overview.

“It’s pretty confusing here with all the people around,” Bob remarked after a few seconds. “Tell me, Pete, why are you fidgeting all the time?”

“I have to go to the toilet terribly urgently,” Pete said. “Can either of you see a toilet sign somewhere?”

Both Jupiter and Bob said no.

“Then I’ll have to ask for directions at the reception,” Pete decided. “I really cannot stand it any more!”

When Bob saw the Second Investigator hurrying to the reception with his legs pressed together, he found it hard to suppress a laugh. Nevertheless, he nudged Jupiter in the side. “Pete’s attracting attention here right now. Look how the man behind the counter is looking at him?”

“Sometimes nature calls at inappropriate moments, Bob,” Jupiter remarked. “Therefore, for once, we should generously overlook it.”

At that moment, the Second Investigator returned from the reception—with an even more conspicuous waddle.

“Aren’t there any toilets here?” wondered Bob. “If you wet your pants now, then—”

“Bingo!” Pete hissed excitedly and pointed inconspicuously over to the reception counter. “The woman there with the dark sunglasses, who was just ahead of me, asked the receptionist if any mail had been deposited for Room 307!”

“Are you serious?” The First Investigator could hardly believe his ears. “Are you sure you haven’t misheard?”

“I am literally under pressure right now, Juve, but fortunately my ears are not affected by that. Room 307,” he affirmed emphatically. “No doubt about it!”

Out of the corner of their eyes, the boys watched as the woman walked towards an offside planter with a lush artificial palm tree, stopped there and took a mobile phone from her handbag. Her age was difficult to estimate at that distance, but she was probably around

forty. She was wearing a knee-length summer dress and flat sandals, and a wide-brimmed summer hat perched on her head.

Cautiously, The Three Investigators crept closer and positioned themselves at a safe distance behind a large event board.

After the woman had tapped on her mobile phone, a few seconds passed before she had the desired person on the other end of the line.

“What is it?” the woman said rather unfriendly, but still quietly. Then she listened for a moment before replying curtly: “I have already paid you handsomely for your assistance.” Again there was a short pause.

“Listen to me,” she hissed into the device. “This is blackmail, in case you’re not aware. It’s punishable by imprisonment.”

The woman switched her phone from one ear to the other and winced briefly. “Police? What do you mean?” After a few breaths, she finally relented. “All right, you greedy beast. Since I’m leaving tomorrow, you’ll have to come to my hotel—tomorrow morning at eleven. I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

Without saying goodbye, the woman ended the conversation and let the mobile phone disappear back into her handbag. Then she calmly strolled towards the lift at the end of the hall.

Jupiter began to pinch his lower lip thoughtfully.

“What do we do now?” he was jolted out of his thoughts by Bob’s question. “Shall we go after them?”

The First Investigator shook his head slowly. “As much as I’m itching to solve the story of the time-travelling Aurora right away, there seems to be someone else involved. Did you just hear the word ‘blackmail’ in the conversation? It’s possible that this other person will flee if we intervene right now. So we should avoid that at all costs, fellas.”

“You’re seriously saying we should twiddle our thumbs until eleven tomorrow morning?” Pete asked.

“No, we will of course use the time to unobtrusively obtain more information about the occupants of Room 307. Apart from the lady with the hat, there is most likely a girl staying there... and then we should gently prepare a certain person for the grand finale tomorrow, which of course she has to attend.”

“Are you talking about Miss Pixie?” Bob wondered.

“You’ve got it, Bob. That’s my part, although I’m not really comfortable with it... and you, Bob, I would ask you to do some more urgent research on the Internet.”

“No problem!” Bob’s eyes lit up with interest. “First, though, we need more information about who stays in Room 307. How we’re going to find out?”

Pete scrunched up his face in agony. “You do what you have to do, people! But for me, there’s only one thing I need to do right now, and that is to go to the toilet! It’s in the basement below the lobby!”

With these words he hurried through the hall, while Jupiter and Bob were amused by his bizarre gait.

“Not only our Second Investigator will soon be relieved,” Jupiter predicted with a confident smile, “but so will our client, to whom we can already present the success of our investigation work this evening. This, I hope, will restore peace within the theatre ensemble—at least for Miss Pixie.”

Bob’s grin ended abruptly. “What do you mean, Jupe? Do you also know something about the lemon juice attack?”

“For now, I can only tell you this much—that I will get in touch with Inspector Cotta again in a moment to invite him to a special performance tonight, which will take place directly after the main performance.”

16. The Mask Falls

When The Three Investigators arrived at the Rocky Beach City Theatre that evening, Inspector Cotta was already waiting impatiently for them in the foyer. His displeasure could be seen from afar by the sour expression on his face.

“Good evening, Inspector,” Jupiter called out and extended his hand to the officer in a friendly manner. “I’m glad you could make it to attend the event here. I can promise you with a probability bordering on certainty that you will not regret having sacrificed your well-earned evening off for this!”

“On the phone, you were very cagey again,” Cotta growled, while the bartenders behind the counter gave him irritated looks. “Could you at least let me in on the situation now, if I’m going to dance so trustingly to your tune? Besides, the employees here seems to fear that something is wrong because the police are in the house. If word gets out, panic might break out!”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Inspector!” Jupiter assured the inspector. “Mr Furlough, the manager of this theatre, is well aware of our intentions. He is already waiting backstage to intercept a certain person for us and will lead her straight to Miss Pixie’s dressing room. That’s exactly where we’re going to now.”

The First Investigator glanced briefly at his watch. “The performance will be over in a few moments. Therefore, there is no time for further explanations as you are about to hear everything anyway. Now, if you would please follow us...”

Cotta was too caught off guard to object and so he followed The Three Investigators through a door and up a staircase that led them into the long, sparsely lit corridor where the dressing rooms were located.

“I had earlier informed Miss Pixie that we would be turning up here tonight and she gave us permission to wait for her in her dressing room.” With these words, Jupiter opened the door of Room 1 and entered, followed by Pete and Bob.

Inspector Cotta followed them in, shaking his head. “The fact that I let myself be carried away by such games does not please me at all, Jupiter. I demand—”

That was as far as he got, for at that moment, the door opened and Miss Pixie faced her guests.

“Good evening, Inspector,” she said as she removed her wig and placed it on the shelf of her dressing table. “Hello, boys! What a night! Only half the auditorium was occupied tonight and after the last act, the curtain opened just once. Oh, well... to what do I owe your presence?” She gave the inspector a suspicious look. “Jupiter merely mentioned that I was in for a big surprise, but I don’t really feel like being surprised anymore today.”

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard from the corridor and a voice that was not unfamiliar to The Three Investigators was heard.

“What’s the meaning of this, Frank?” the woman raged. “Why are you bringing me here —”

“—Into the lion’s den, that’s right!” Jupiter finished the sentence after Mr Furlough had entered the dressing room with a visibly upset lady.

“Frank? Maggie?” Miss Pixie expressed surprise. “What’s going on? Are we having a meeting here?”

“I’d be interested to know that too!” Maggie exclaimed. “For what reason did you lead me here, Frank?”

“—To show you and all of us present here, this white card...” Jupe announced and took out an envelope. “You slipped this card under the door of Miss Pixie’s apartment. In it is a message telling Miss Pixie to look in her cupboard, where you had previously installed the sneaky trap with the lemon juice.”

“What card? What trap?” Miss Shatner exclaimed in defence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. In fact, how dare you accuse me of such things. You have no proof!”

“Yes, I do,” Jupe calmly said. “Lady Sophina No. 4.”

“What?” Miss Shatner exclaimed.

“Lady Sophina No. 4,” Jupe repeated. “That’s the perfume you wear, and that’s the fragrance found on this card inside this envelope.”

“Oh, is that so?” Miss Shatner replied irritably. “If this concerns my perfume and your malicious insinuations about some trap, you’re barking up the wrong tree, my friend!” She laughed triumphantly. “Why would I set a trap for Miss Pixie? Why should I?”

The First Investigator opted for the ruthless approach. “—Because you begrudge the special status that Miss Pixie enjoys in this theatre. This was evident from your comments at the opening night party when we asked you about Miss Pixie’s condition. It was hard not to notice your contempt. To drive Miss Pixie out of the company, you resorted to rather drastic means. You took the apartment key from Miss Pixie’s handbag here in her dressing room, made an impression of it and used a duplicate key to gain access to her apartment in order to install the allergy-inducing trap in the cupboard.”

“Your allegations are completely baseless!” Miss Shatner went on the frontal attack. “In fact, you are absolutely insane!”

“I have not mistaken, ma’am,” the First Investigator countered calmly, “because even if the fragrance on the card you left at your colleague’s apartment doesn’t hold up as evidence in court, I have something here that clearly and incontrovertibly identifies you as the culprit!”

With a grand gesture, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small object, which he held directly under Miss Shatner’s nose.

“What’s that supposed to be?” she asked, emphatically bored, but the fluttering of her eyelids showed how nervous she now was.

Jupiter was clearly enjoying the undivided attention of everyone present. “This, ma’am, is a USB flash drive, on which is stored a video recording from the surveillance camera at Miss Pixie’s apartment. It clearly shows you, Miss Shatner, entering your adversary’s living room, opening the cupboard and installing the water pistol inside! Denial is therefore absolutely pointless!”

All at once, Miss Shatner’s self-assured façade began to crumble. With wide eyes, she stared at the flash drive in Jupiter’s hand and desperately struggled to find the right words.

Eventually, she turned to face Miss Pixie and said: “You probably won’t understand it, Gladys, but your insatiable greed for attention, the manner with which you demand the lead role every time, your pomposity at rehearsals and your inconsideration of the ensemble...” Her lips tightened into a thin line. “Someone has to put a stop to that for once and teach you a lesson that might finally make you rethink.”

Miss Pixie was incapable of any response.

Bob, on the other hand, felt an unbridled rage rising inside him. “You’re lucky that your lemon juice jet missed Miss Pixie by a hair’s breadth thanks to a fluke, because if she hadn’t

taken off her high heels, then—”

“Now, wait a minute,” Miss Shatner interjected excitedly, exposing her upper row of gums. “There was only lemon juice in the tank of the water pistol. That wouldn’t kill a person! I just wanted her face to be covered in rash and sores, that’s all!”

“I see!” concluded Bob. “You would have known that such contact can trigger severe symptoms on Miss Pixie—so she can’t perform for a few days!. How did you even know about her allergy to citrus?”

“I can answer that question for you, Bob!” Jupiter took a step towards Miss Shatner and looked at her piercingly. “I’m sure Miss Pixie herself mentioned it casually to her colleagues here from time to time, but you knew about it at the latest from the time Pete wanted to order orange juice for all of us in the foyer and you, Miss Shatner, were standing next to us at the counter within earshot.”

“Well, Maggie. I’m afraid that was your last performance today!” Mr Furlough spoke up. “—At least in my theatre! I don’t want to see you around here again. I suggest you go pack your things and leave with the police.”

Meanwhile, Inspector Cotta had contacted his officers waiting outside the theatre. A policewoman arrived and led away Miss Shatner, who by now, had lost all colour from her face.

Then the inspector pulled Jupiter aside. The First Investigator was beaming like a Cheshire cat. “Well? Did I promise you too much, sir?” he asked the inspector.

“Well done!” Cotta said. “You’ve done an excellent job once again. We will take over this case from now... and I need that USB flash drive for evidence.”

“Why, Inspector?” Jupe said. “Miss Shatner already admitted her role in this incident right in front of all of us. You don’t need any more evidence as it is, don’t you think?”

The inspector thought for a moment, and then said: “I suspect there is not a shred of evidence on your flash drive, isn’t it? You were bluffing—admit it!”

“Bingo!” Jupiter grinned broadly. “Since I knew that Miss Shatner’s perfume trail alone might not suffice as proof, I resorted to this ruse.”

“—Which has proved very successful,” the inspector praised. “You know what, Jupiter Jones, you’re pushing your luck with such tactics.”

“I have to take my chances, Inspector,” Jupe replied.

“Yeah, sure,” the inspector remarked. “Now, to you three, and also to you, Miss Pixie and Mr Furlough, I wish you a peaceful night. We’ll hear from each other again!” With these words, he left the dressing room.

Miss Pixie, who had stood motionless all this time, heaved a deep sigh of relief. “What do you know—Maggie Shatner. Well, she’s the last person I’d have guessed wanting me out of here!”

“Well, you only practise your profession as a criminalist on stage,” Pete couldn’t help commenting, “and I don’t mind you keeping it that way—or are you trying to put us out of work?”

“No, not at all!” the actress replied, amused. “In any case, your work isn’t finished yet. The thing with Aurora hasn’t been cleared up yet.”

Jupiter lowered his voice. “There are also interesting news for you in that matter, ma’am. For confidentiality reasons however, I suggest that we do not discuss it here. We still need to do some investigation, but we will inform you about everything by tomorrow morning at the latest. Please trust us and be patient a little longer!”

Miss Pixie made a face. “Patience is not one of my strongest points, but you know, a Gladys Pixie always masters her role one hundred percent—once an actress, always an

actress!”

17. Meeting With the Blackmailer

The next morning, The Three Investigators set off early in Pete's MG in the direction of Anaheim.

In the car, Bob delivered an unexpected message to his two investigator colleagues. "So, Jupe... yesterday you suggested to me to do another Internet search for 'Quentin Kurtz', but this time in connection with the name 'McVerry'. Okay, I only managed to get one hit that has both the names of 'Quentin' and 'McVerry'. Mind you, it's just 'Quentin' and not 'Quentin Kurtz'."

"So, what is it?" Jupe asked curtly.

"It's a fairly short newspaper announcement," Bob continued. "However, if this means anything to our case, it will bring a tragic and surprising aspect into play that probably none of us expected—perhaps including our client as well."

Pete turned onto the highway, glancing in the rearview mirror at Bob. "What kind of announcement is it?"

"An obituary," Bob explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "To be specific, a classified obituary that says that a certain 'Quentin' has died three weeks ago at the age of eighty-two in Scotland."

"Scotland?" The Second Investigator suddenly had trouble concentrating on the traffic. "So he didn't travel to the future then, but took off to Scotland?"

"Hold on a minute, Pete," Bob said. "Before we jump into any conclusions, let me remind you that the announcement says 'Quentin' and not 'Quentin Kurtz'. Like I said, it is the only link I found that has both 'Quentin' and 'McVerry'. It is in a regional gazette for a small, remote village community in Scotland. Let me read to you the nondescript announcement that was dated three weeks ago:"

*With great sadness, we announce the peaceful passing of our beloved Quentin at the age of 82. The funeral will be a private ceremony for family and close friends.
The McVerry Family*

"That was all," Bob said. "No further names or details."

"Okay..." Pete said. "So it could be any 'Quentin', and 'McVerry' could be a common surname in Scotland."

"You're right, Pete," Bob agreed. "In fact, I was lucky to have even found such an obscure announcement. Anyway, it might not mean anything to us."

"Hmm..." Jupiter wondered. "Nevertheless, we can still keep in view this piece of news. You see... as we know, the authorities were looking for Quentin Kurtz back then. He could very well have escaped to Scotland and continued to use his given name but not his surname to avoid being tracked. He could even have changed his name to 'Quentin McVerry'. In addition, the age of eighty-two does fit in."

"Why would you so suddenly wanting more information about Mr Kurtz?" Pete asked. "If this 'Quentin' is really 'Quentin Kurtz', you couldn't possibly have anticipated his recent passing, could you?"

“Of course not,” the First Investigator interjected. “Rather, I noticed that Miss Pixie basically only ever spoke of her missing daughter, but never of the child’s father, who had also disappeared.”

“That’s right,” it now struck Pete. “—And hadn’t Bob also checked that there had been arguments between Gladys Pixie and Quentin Kurtz shortly before he and Aurora disappeared?”

Bob nodded in agreement. “How do you think Miss Pixie will take our news? Or do you think she already knows all this?”

“I don’t think so,” the First Investigator surmised. “However, when I called her this morning to give her instructions for our meeting at the Cotton Bay Hotel, she seemed a bit tight-lipped by her standards... but you know how she can be sometimes. Of course, she was also taken aback by what I asked her to do for our meeting.”

“What did you ask her to do?” Pete flicked the turn signal and changed lanes.

“That she come to our showdown dressed up beyond recognition.”

“You want her to dress up?” snapped Bob. “What for?”

“That’s part of my plan, otherwise, the trap might not even work. It’s simple!”

“I see. It’s simple—a plan and a trap,” Pete was less than enthusiastic about Jupiter’s meagre information. “Unlike us, you surely had to let Miss Pixie in on your plan, didn’t you? I mean, surely she would have asked you a question to find out the reason for this strange request!”

The First Investigator grinned meaningfully. “That’s exactly how it was—yet she has no information that you do not already have. I merely offered our client the prospect of finally getting answers to all the questions she has been torturing herself with for over thirty years. The condition for this was that she had to dress up in disguise... and she has accepted that. So nothing more can go wrong.”

A short time later, The Three Investigators were on the lookout for Miss Pixie in the lobby of the Cotton Bay Hotel.

“What? You’ve got to be kidding!” Pete groaned, slapping his forehead and gesturing over to a couch. “I bet that’s her! Talk about dressing up!”

Bob rubbed his eyes. “Are you really sure, Pete? Has Miss Pixie dressed up as Jackie O for such an important mission?”

“Just come along, you’ll see it’s her!” Determinedly, Pete crossed the reception hall and headed for the couch, followed by Jupiter and Bob.

The lady was dressed in a double-breasted, raspberry pink and navy trim collared suit, matched with a pink pillbox hat and white gloves. On her face was a pair of oversize sunglasses with a large, round tortoise shell frame and brown lens—the famous ‘Jackie O glasses’.

“Good morning, ma’am!” he greeted ‘Jackie O’ with an over-friendly undertone in his voice. “That is really an original costume!”

“Miss Pixie?” Bob looked in wonder. “Is it really you?”

The actress reacted visibly disappointed. “How did you recognize me so quickly? I really gave it my all! This was a costume I wore in one of my previous performances.”

“You look really fantastic,” Jupiter commented, “and fit fabulously into this ambience! We definitely have to take a photo together later and—”

“Jupe!” Bob nudged the First Investigator excitedly on the arm. “Here comes Mrs McVerry out of the lift!”

Alarmed, Jupiter and Pete turned around. The woman who had made the phone call to the blackmailer the previous evening glanced briefly at her watch and then walked leisurely towards a counter serving coffee and cold soft drinks. She was wearing her dark sunglasses again, but she had dispensed with her wide-brimmed summer hat.

"Now, ma'am, we will do as we agreed," the First Investigator gave Miss Pixie his instructions once more. "We'll get into position now, while you sit here and join us as soon as I give you the signal. All right?"

The actress nodded. "I understand, but can't you at least give me a little clue as to who this woman is and what this is all about?"

"The moment of truth is approaching sooner than you think, ma'am," Jupiter assured her. "Please have a little patience... and you, fellas, come! Here we go!"

The three inconspicuously approached the drinks bar, where the woman had in the meantime ordered a coffee and sat down on a bar stool.

Bob guided his friends to a corner of the hotel lobby from where they had a good view of the lady, but without being seen by her.

The minutes passed without anyone appearing. Restlessly, the woman kept glancing at her watch and took a sip from the coffee cup now and then.

Suddenly Pete's eyes widened and he stared at the person who had just entered the reception hall. "I can't believe this!"

Jupiter and Bob felt the same way.

With brisk steps, a slim, dark-haired woman approached, who was not unknown to The Three Investigators. She strode towards the counter where Mrs McVerry was sitting on the bar stool, stopped directly in front of her and demonstratively held her palm under her nose.

"I hope you have something for me?" the newcomer said.

Mrs McVerry calmly put down her coffee cup, opened her handbag and pulled out a small envelope.

For Jupiter, this was the decisive moment to intervene. He pulled his friends with him and approached the two women.

"Good morning, Conchita!" he greeted the Mexican with exuberant friendliness.

Señora Dominguez froze like a statue.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mrs McVerry turned to the Mexican woman. She took off her sunglasses and looked The Three Investigators in the eye. "Who are you? And what do you want?"

"My name is Jupiter Jones and these are my two fellow investigators Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. If I'm not mistaken, you are Mrs McVerry."

The woman did not make a face. "Investigators? What do you want from me?"

"That means we're onto you," Jupiter replied with satisfaction. "—You and at least one of your accomplices. Thanks to Señora Dominguez's greed for money, we finally know how the alleged Aurora could disappear so suddenly from the ladies' room."

"I am not guilty of anything!" the Mexican defended herself, gesticulating wildly with her hands. "I was told by Mrs McVerry that it was just a little game!"

"I see, a little game," Jupiter repeated, "and I can also imagine exactly what the instructions for this game were. When the girl comes running down the corridor, she will go into the men's room. The men's room has a sign outside that says 'Cleaning in Progress', so that no one else will enter. Then you tell the people who come after the girl that she has, of course, gone into the ladies' room."

"That's exactly how it was," Señora Dominguez said frankly.

Pete paused. “—But we also looked in the men’s room afterwards. There was no one there!”

“That’s right...” Jupiter agreed. “Actually a very simple trick! Do you remember, fellas? After Miss Pixie came out of the ladies’ room, Conchita joked around and opened the small cleaning cupboard in the corridor to demonstrate to us that the girl wasn’t in there either. Afterwards, she guided us into the ladies’ room together so that we could all have another look around. That was when the girl took advantage of this moment, slipped out of the men’s room and then hid in the small cleaning cupboard. We did not look in there a second time!”

“You’ve got it exactly right!” marvelled Señora Dominguez. “Mrs McVerry had given me a hundred dollars in advance for the prank. You can’t blame me for wanting another hundred dollars when I realized that there was something fishy about the supposed joke I had been hired for. The situation really didn’t seem very cheerful.”

“Two hundred dollars for that?” Pete let out an astonished whistle. “That’s quite a bit you have paid your accomplice, Mrs McVerry!”

“I am not an accomplice!” protested Señora Dominguez. “I really thought it was all a joke at first, but your reaction was far too serious for that. I was tricked by this woman. I finally realized that she was up to something fishy when I threatened her with the police on the phone yesterday. After this bluff, she was suddenly prepared to pay me another hundred dollars—which I’m happy to take. I don’t want to get into any more trouble, and if you *amigos* don’t mind, I’d like to say goodbye now!”

At that moment, Pete noticed a movement behind him. Turning around, he looked straight into Miss Pixie’s face, on which a petrified expression was visible despite the disguise.

Frightened like a small child, she approached with cautious steps and hesitantly walked towards Mrs McVerry. Then she stopped close in front of her and looked stunned into her eyes.

“Aurora?”

18. Is Time Travel Possible?

Mrs McVerry's features froze and seemed frozen all at once.

Seconds passed...

The two women just looked at each other. Nobody said a word.

More seconds passed...

Miss Pixie's lips began to tremble uncontrollably. Finally, the actress could no longer hold back her tears and began to weep bitterly.

As Miss Pixie's weeping turned to tragic sobs, Jupiter looked around and noticed a couple with two small children happily approaching the drinks counter. For this reason, he slowly turned to Mrs McVerry and whispered softly to her: "I don't mean to offend you, ma'am, but wouldn't you think it is better if we went to your room together?"

Mrs McVerry looked at the First Investigator, nodded silently and motioned for the boys and Miss Pixie to follow her to the lift.

Only at that moment did the investigators realize that Señora Dominguez had taken advantage of the moment to make a run for it.

"Let's just forget about Conchita, fellas," Jupiter murmured quietly to his friends as they walked behind Miss Pixie and Mrs McVerry. "She was just a bit player in a larger scheme and is actually harmless."

Pete grinned. "She could easily perform on stage with her toilet show act. I really bought her performance!"

"Me too," Bob agreed as the lift doors opened in front of them and they entered the cabin together with the two ladies.

No one spoke a word during the ride to the third floor.

Only after they had entered Mrs McVerry's hotel room was the silence broken.

"Well?" Mrs McVerry slipped off her sandals and shoved them under the bed with her foot. "What's this about? Please be brief, because I'm running out of time!"

Pete thought he had misheard. "Are you kidding me? Are you Miss Pixie's daughter Aurora or did I misunderstand something down there in the lobby?"

"Take a closer look at her face," Bob suggested to the Second Investigator. "Then there's no need for your question."

Jupiter pointed to an armchair next to the room bar. "Wouldn't you like to offer your mother a seat or should she continue to stand here?"

"Sit down, Mum," Mrs McVerry replied curtly. "But first to you..." She turned to the First Investigator. "I want to know who you guys are and what you have to do with us?"

"We are investigators," Juve replied. "Miss Pixie hired us to investigate the girl who appeared in the theatre four days ago and who looks like her missing daughter."

"Okay," Mrs McVerry said, "so what do you want from me?"

Jupiter decided to speak plainly: "Why did you and your father play against your mother so badly and make her believe that thirty-two years ago, you had gone to the future?"

Mrs McVerry crossed her arms energetically. "I was twelve at the time. My father took me on a trip. I was grateful to him for that and, frankly to this day, I haven't regretted the decision to go off with him."

“—Because there were so many arguments back then, right?” the First Investigator surmised.

“So many arguments is a gross understatement,” Mrs McVerry said. “It was a nightmare and hardly bearable. Shall I give you some examples?”

Miss Pixie’s fingers clawed at the arm of the chair. “Shut up, Aurora! You were a little girl then and far too young to look at the situation objectively! And memories get distorted after all this time.”

“What nonsense! The older I got, the more I remembered my childhood!” Mrs McVerry burst out. “All you ever thought about was yourself and your career! You never took Daddy seriously, always made fun of his work and trampled on his vision instead of supporting him. Do you think I didn’t notice your regular nightly arguments in which you accused him of pursuing his life’s dream rather than investing his money in your career? You have always accused us of being in your way, while you were always somewhere else socializing and promoting your success. Daddy was always there for me, and when you were away, he took me to the synchrotron. Even for that, you made a lot of noise!”

“I think that’s enough,” Jupiter tried to put an end to the reproaches. “You are welcome to continue dealing with the past later—without us. What was said so far is enough for understanding the situation. There is one thing—by any chance you and your father went into hiding in Scotland back then?”

Miss Pixie’s daughter looked at Jupiter in irritation. “How do you know about Scotland?”

“Like I told you, ma’am, we are investigators,” Jupe explained. “What we do is investigate, and we investigate anything.”

Bob listened with interest. “Well, that’s where you went in your journey, right? To Scotland?”

“Since you are so eager to find out...” Mrs McVerry said, “my father was able to complete his invention back then. He created the time travel machine and set off with me to the future. Only after that, we made our way to Scotland.”

“When in the future?” asked Jupiter provocatively.

“If you really must know, it’s four years into the future,” she snapped back.

Jupiter grinned broadly. “Life would only be half as good without dreams and fantasies, Mrs McVerry. Everyone has their fantasies. I love mind games and for that reason, I would be very interested to know how this current situation will end. I believe that the answer to this question should not be difficult for you, since you would already know your future.”

Mrs McVerry was not taken by surprise. “What I can tell you is this—my twelve-year-old daughter Angela will be knocking on the door here in a few minutes, and then we will both be gone—to another time.”

“That’s not a realistic answer for me,” Jupiter provoked her. “I would be much more interested to know whether you will reconcile with your mother, or at least hold out the hope of doing so, before your departure to... uh... another time and space.” The First Investigator then turned to look at Miss Pixie, who was sitting in the chair looking as white as a sheet.

When Jupiter turned back to Aurora, he noticed that her face showed a hint of uncertainty. However, she laughed briefly, and asked: “If you want to talk sentiments, then I think you’ve come to the wrong place!”

“Fine, then I won’t,” Jupiter replied. “However, may I nevertheless tell you my view of the situation?”

“If you so wish, go ahead!”

“Thirty-two years ago, when it came to light that your father Quentin Kurtz had not only had personal problems with your mother, but had also stashed away a large quantity of highly

technical components at the synchrotron in Long Island, and that a police search was imminent, he saw no other way out than to leave the country immediately. It remains to be seen whether he had actually developed a functioning time machine at that time or just only wanted to convince you—as a child then—that such a device exists. In any case, he let you in on his short-term travel plans, whereupon you said goodbye to your mother in the New York apartment with the words that you would soon embark on a journey into the future together with your father.”

“Yes, and so?” Mrs McVerry pressed her lips firmly together.

“We read in the newspaper reports of the time how Miss Pixie described her daughter’s disappearance,” Jupiter continued. “She said that after she had put the baking tray into the oven and then turned around, the child had suddenly disappeared from the scene.”

“That’s exactly how it was!” Miss Pixie abruptly burst out. “I can still remember all of this!”

“Understandable, ma’am,” Bob agreed with the actress. “After the inexplicable disappearance of your supposed daughter from the ladies’ room in the theatre a few days ago, I can now at least imagine how you must have felt thirty-two years ago. The effect must have been similar!”

The First Investigator took back the floor, venting his feelings: “Mrs McVerry, your mother has racked her brain for so long wondering what really happened to you. Thirty-two years between hope, repression, madness and despair as you got married and became a mother yourself. Yet, after all these years, you could not forgive your own mother for neglecting her family, and hurting and ridiculing your beloved father, for the sake of her career.

“Recently your father passed away, which apparently affected you so much that you had the crazy idea of taking revenge on your mother by using your own daughter, who has a spitting image of you when you were of her age.”

“My father did not recently pass away,” Mrs McVerry said. “As far as I’m concerned, he died four years ago.”

“That cannot be it,” Bob interjected. “I have a copy of an obituary posted in Scotland by your family saying that he passed away three weeks ago at the age of eighty-two.”

“That is your time three weeks ago,” Mrs McVerry clarified. “From my time, that was four years ago.”

“Please, Mrs McVerry...” the First Investigator responded in annoyance. “It is clear to us that you wanted to make your mother believe that Quentin Kurtz was not crazy after all, but had actually developed a time machine. That’s a final tribute, so to speak, to him and his visions of time travel.”

Mrs McVerry laughed out. “Don’t you think it’s ignorant to claim that time travel is not possible?”

“It’s a fact that there are accepted theoretical explanations on how time travel could come about,” Jupe replied, “but the nature of time travel you just claimed cannot be achieved yet... probably not in the immediate future.”

“Aha!” Mrs McVerry exclaimed. “Are you one of those who believe in only what official science tells you? In that sense, science sets the limits of truth and knowledge, and anything beyond that is unacceptable?”

“If you want to put it that way, yes,” the First Investigator replied. “I can’t place any importance in anything that has yet to be scientifically verified. That includes phenomena that defy logic, like your time-travel claim. Of course, there are observations that have yet to be

explained but they will be, in due course. That's the beauty of it. When scientists make new discoveries and harness the benefits, that's how humanity will progress."

"Surely you are also one of those who believe in all seriousness that the human being is the crown of creation and is the only intelligent creature in the universe, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that," Jupiter replied promptly, "but I'm sure you have to appreciate the advantages humans have over other beings by being able to understand and exploit scientific knowledge for humankind. In fact—"

"Jupe, please!" Bob had to intervene before the First Investigator continued his long-winded monologue. "May I suggest that we stick to the important issue we are currently here for?"

"Sure," the First Investigator replied dryly. "I was just trying to inject some logic and common sense into the conversation... In any case, Mrs McVerry, I would like to know why it was necessary for you to use your daughter to make your mother believe that you have returned from the future after thirty-two years. Was it just to take revenge on her? And what about using old answering machine tapes on which recorded messages with your childhood voice were preserved, to create the illusion that you had not aged in all those years?"

Suddenly there was a knock on the room door. Mrs McVerry stepped out into the hallway, opened the door and then returned to the room, followed by a young girl with dripping wet hair.

"We have guests, Angela," she introduced the visitors to her daughter. "This is... uh... well... this is..." she pointed towards the armchair, "this is your grandma."

Shyly, the girl stepped closer and looked admirably at Miss Pixie. "Pretty nice suit you're wearing!"

The actress smiled enchantingly and stroked her granddaughter's wet hair tenderly. "You can't imagine how much I would like to get to know you... and listen to lots of stories that you have..."

Mrs McVerry clapped her hands with determination. "Yes, yes, but before we get to know each other any further, Angela, could you quickly go to the bathroom and blow-dry your hair. How many times have I told you not to walk around with wet hair after swimming?"

"All right, Mum!" replied Angela, giving Miss Pixie a peck on the cheek. "See you later, Grandma." Then she turned and walked to the hallway leading to the bathroom. Shortly afterwards, the soft hum of a hair dryer could be heard.

"She really does look exactly like you did thirty-two years ago," Miss Pixie said raptly, looking tenderly at her daughter. "No wonder I thought she was you... and I would give anything if we could be together again..."

Mrs McVerry exhaled deeply. "I'll think about it, Mum... I promise."

At that moment, Angela's voice sounded from the bathroom. "Mum! Can you come here a minute?"

"It won't take long," Mrs McVerry said and hurriedly disappeared into the hallway.

Miss Pixie was moved to tears and gave The Three Investigators her best smile. "You can't believe how grateful I am to you three! I feel like I've been reborn and I could hug the whole world!"

For some inexplicable reason, the First Investigator was suddenly overcome by an uneasy feeling, and without thinking, he stepped into the hallway and listened. Behind the closed door of the bathroom, the monotonous hum of the hair dryer could still be heard.

"Mrs McVerry? Is everything all right?" Jupiter called out.

There was no reply. Now Pete and Bob also came up.

“Hello? Mrs McVerry?” Jupiter called again, and knocked on the door several times. Then he turned the knob and slowly opened the door.

The hair dryer was lying on the floor of the bathroom, humming away. Mrs McVerry and her daughter Angela, however, were not there.

Pete went past Jupiter and searched the bathroom. There was only a small window at the top and it was too small for anyone to go through.

“Jupe...” Pete stammered. “There’s no other exit, so where did they go?”

Nobody said anything.

The hairs on the back of Pete’s neck stood up. “Would it be possible that they travelled back to the future?” he asked. “—In a time machine?”

“Nonsense, Pete!” Jupiter replied quietly. Nevertheless, he began to pinch his lower lip thoughtfully...